

DEEP WATER

LEA TASSIE

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(Deception Bay series - Book 2)

by

Lea Tassie

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Grateful thanks to my editor, Leanne Taylor!

The nice thing about living in a small town is that when you don't know what you're doing,
someone else does. (Anonymous)

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Chapter 1 Brenda and her Boys

The urgent jangle of the alarm clock shocked me out of a sound sleep. I sat up fast and swung my feet over the side of the bed. For a minute I couldn't do anything but sit still, blinking, letting the shock drain away, waiting for my heart to slow down. The only fact registering in my brain was the daylight shining against the closed window blind. That meant it must be morning and I then realized that this was Monday and I had to go to work. A glance at the clock told me I'd better get moving.

I reached for my dressing gown, which lay crumpled on the floor, and the rest of my life began to push its way through the thinning sleep fog.

Last night. Larry.

The memory brought a little electrical thrill to nerve ends all over my body.

The other side of the bed was rumpled and messy, its pillow teetering on the edge. Larry and I had been close friends; now we were lovers. He'd gone back to his own apartment so he could sleep in, since he didn't have to be at work until five this afternoon. Or maybe he had the day off. I couldn't remember.

Neither one of us had planned for it to happen. Last evening we'd been playing crib together in The Maggie, the hotel bar where he worked, and having our usual gossip about people who lived in Deception Bay. We always told each other the dirt we knew, secure in the knowledge that neither of us would ever blab a word to anyone else. But gossip has its own methods of working. If a friend told me something and swore me to secrecy, which meant I couldn't tell Larry, a day or two later I'd hear exactly the same gossip from him, heard from an entirely different source. It seemed as though nobody kept any secrets but us.

Anyway, it wasn't the gossip itself that interested us so much as what had caused the events resulting in gossip. We loved both village life and figuring out what made its people do the crazy things they did.

Last night had a different ending. When nobody was left in the bar but the two of us, Larry looked at me, and I looked at him and I guess we read each other's minds. Or, maybe it had been our bodies sharing a single lustful thought.

And now I would have to tell Charlie the news that I was sleeping with Larry.

Charlie probably wouldn't mind the 'sleeping' part. But how would he feel about the 'girlfriend' part?

I went into the bathroom and turned on the shower. The rush of hot water brought the rest of me awake and worried. Had I created a big problem for myself by giving into a desire that had been building for a long time?

Charlie was a dear friend. And so was Larry. I didn't want to give up either one as a companion. But how could I have two steady boyfriends in a village where everybody knew what was going on almost before it happened? And, if they didn't know, they made up possible scenarios, aired them as fact, and voiced strong opinions about them.



In the kitchen, DeeCee meowed and insinuated her plump and somewhat ragged gray self between my ankles, reminding me to give her some breakfast. I gave myself some as well, sitting

at the kitchen table to eat it since the dining room table was, as usual, covered with reference books and half-done crossword puzzles from the Sunday *New York Times*.

Coffee could wait until I got to the office. I put on my blue jacket with the Paradise Realty crest, grabbed my shoulder bag and went out the front door. I stopped there, on the top step. The office would also have to wait for a moment, while I admired the bright, glorious, September morning. Winter would be along soon, with gray skies and rain, and make these blue skies merely a memory.

On the slope below, toward the ivy-covered Tudor-style Wayfarer Inn, where Larry worked in The Maggie, yellow maple leaves scattered glowing color among the houses. Deception Bay, and the Strait of Georgia beyond, lay sparkling and calm against the dark blue background of the Coast Mountains on the mainland. Even Sifton and Magdalena Islands, a mile out in the Strait, sported bright autumn colors this morning.

I caught a tantalizing whiff of smoke and tracked it to my right-hand neighbors. Stan and Priscilla must have spent the weekend raking up leaves in their big back yard. I sighed, wistful and wishful, wanting to go sit on the back steps and bask in the whiff of smoke and the warmth of sunshine.

But I couldn't do that. There were car payments to be made and groceries to buy. Sitting on the back step wouldn't cut it.

My little sky-blue Honda waited in the carport, and I headed for it along the cement sidewalk which bordered two flower beds under the living room window. The bare dirt under wilted iris fronds reminded me that I needed to plant tulip bulbs before the first snowfall. I was happy living in this 70s cream stucco house my mother had left me, but I wished I'd inherited more than a tiny smidgen of her enthusiasm for gardening.

A few minutes later, I parked the Honda behind the office. Anne-Marie, the receptionist at Paradise Realty, gave me a big smile as I walked in the door. As usual, she looked stunning. I sometimes wondered how long it took her to blow-dry her deceptively casual auburn hair, put on her makeup, and coordinate her jewelry and clothes. I wore my shoulder-length blonde hair and blue eyes plain. I'd tried makeup in my teens but gave it up as too much trouble. The only enhancement I bothered with now was a good haircut.

"Well, good morning, Brenda!" she said. "You're looking all bright-eyed and bushy-tailed. Have a date with Charlie last night?"

That was a very mild, very gentle sample of the nosy questions I'd be getting once the news leaked out that I was dating two men.

"Nope, no date. I guess it's just that I had a good night's sleep." The sleep had been good, all right, but not nearly long enough.

Anne-Marie raised her eyebrows, a knowing smile quirking her lips.

So, she didn't believe me. Well, I certainly couldn't afford to tell her the truth. The first thing she'd ask was when I'd broken up with Charlie. And why. Then she'd ask if it didn't bother me that Larry was younger. The trouble with village life is that everybody knows the basic facts about everybody else. And what they don't know, they enjoy making up. All you have to do is go to bed with somebody once, and the rest of the community has you married, raising four children, and applying for the old age pension, all before you've put clean sheets on the bed in question.

As I headed for the coffee maker that lived beside the photostat machine in the cluttered back room, I reminded myself that age was just a number. Hair, skin, and clothes were merely coverings for the person inside. Besides, who knew what might happen during the next ten,

twenty, or thirty years? Life was way too interesting to worry about anything that far down the road.

Dane Soper stood at the coffee urn, pouring himself a mug of brew. I said, "Good morning!" hoping he didn't sense the extreme dislike I felt for him. I had to work with the bastard, after all.

But, with an ego as big as Mount Arrowsmith, which possibly helped compensate him for being shorter than the average guy, Dane would never dream that anyone could dislike him. "Morning, Brenda. I'm on floor duty today, by the way."

He was warning me not to poach his territory. Being on floor duty meant he got to grab anybody walking in off the street to ask about real estate.

"Good for you," I said, and walked purposefully into my own small territory. The less I had to do with Dane, the better, because I could barely manage to be polite to him. I'd known the man for ten years or so and had never liked him.

But now, after finding out he'd participated in the gang-rape of my friend, Gina, I found it difficult even to be in the same room with him.

Nobody but Larry and I knew about the rape except for the victim, Gina, and the other four men involved. I knew because Gina had told me, in strict confidence, and Larry knew because one of the men had made a drunken confession to him before leaving town, hopefully forever. Gina hadn't reported it to the cops because she didn't want her old-fashioned Catholic family to know about it, or to go through the hassle herself.

All the men had since had awful things happen to them and I felt sure that at least some of these things were not simple coincidences, that Gina had taken revenge. But, sensibly enough, she wouldn't tell me anything. Anyway, if she was responsible for the events, all I could do was cheer her on. And I hoped that she wasn't finished yet. Dane had a strong sense of entitlement, and he probably didn't even think he'd done anything wrong.

I pushed that thought back into the compartment of my mind where I file village secrets and sat down to study the latest real estate listings. Two prospective buyers new to the village were looking for somewhere wonderful to settle down and, thus far, nothing had met their over-the-top requirements.



"Hi, Brenda! Care to have lunch with me?"

"I'd love to." It was Charlie on the other end of the phone line. "Where?"

"The usual in ten minutes?"

I said yes, and went to the washroom to comb my hair. The Princess Café was in our only mall, the Georgia View, barely a block away. Of course, in Deception Bay's business section, almost nothing was further than a block away from where you happened to be.

I got there first and Patsy had a mug of coffee in front of me two seconds after I sat down. I smiled at her and sat back to anticipate Charlie's arrival. Patsy would be anticipating it, too, for Charlie was the best eye candy for miles around. Tall and slim, with wavy black hair, brown eyes, and a pencil mustache, his lean, dark face, and easy smile exuded sex appeal. Added to that, his dress style was far beyond the usual jeans and baseball caps seen in the village and, of course, his car was a sporty black Mazda.

He walked into the café, dropped a kiss on my cheek, and sat down. After Patsy delivered his coffee, I said, "Taking the day off?"

"No. I'm due in court at two. I've been reviewing the files at home." Charlie had a law practice in Breslow, some twenty miles to the south. Even his voice was sexy, like dark chocolate liqueur. "How have things been since I saw you Friday?"

"I did an open house on Saturday, but nobody was interested enough to make an offer, so it turned out to be a quiet day. Ditto for Sunday. I did the crossword puzzle, went to a karate class, and vegged out. How about you?"

Charlie smiled. "Karate sounds more like hard work than vegging out. I spent most of the weekend getting the facts about this case straight in my mind. Scott did invite me to dinner Saturday night, but he said he wanted to talk business, so I didn't ask you to come along." Scott was a prosecutor and Charlie's buddy.

I'd often wished I could tell Charlie about Gina and the gang-rape, and get some idea of the legal implications. But I'd promised Gina my silence. One of the rapists, Ray Kallinsky, was in the Breslow jail, charged with dealing in drugs. Scott had casually mentioned these facts about Kallinsky to Charlie, perhaps thinking Charlie would be interested in the fate of a fellow Deception Bay resident. I guessed Charlie would also know that Ray had been caught because of his house being searched after the fire in his garage sent him to hospital. I suspected Gina had set the fire, but of course I couldn't share that thought with anyone but Larry.

Patsy brought our lunch, salmon sandwiches made with fresh whole wheat bread, and coffee refills. I let a few minutes go by while we ate, thinking about Charlie and the times we'd spent together. I'd met him through my job, showing him the house on the corner of Winthrop and Jarvis, old and grungy but with a fantastic view of Georgia Strait. The house had since been renovated and redecorated, and I'd eaten many a fine meal in Charlie's butter-yellow kitchen.

I pushed my empty sandwich plate away and told him I'd signed up for an evening bridge class at the local high school, with Wilfred Lansdowne as instructor. Wilf taught history and was inclined to grumble that students didn't give him the kind of respect he deserved, but he was a pretty good guy. Sometimes we played darts together when his wife was doing afternoon shift at the Grenville General in Breslow.

"Great!" Charlie said. "That means we'll be able to play bridge together when you're through."

"I'm looking forward to it."

But would he still want to play bridge with me when I told him about Larry and me? That fear produced a slightly queasy feeling in my stomach.

Over more coffee, Charlie told me a few anonymous details about the case he was working on, and I made all the right noises, but apparently not right enough.

"You're on another planet," he said. "What are you not telling me?"

"You know me way too well."

"Come on, Brenda, give. What's the problem?"

Might as well get it over with. "I can't tell you here. Somebody might overhear and add two and two to make seventeen. Can we sit in your car for a few minutes?"

He gave me a long sober look, sighed, and went to the counter to pay the bill. I followed him outside, and we settled into his Mazda. He turned his head to look at me, and said, "You're going to get married."

"God, no! Charlie, you should know me better than that. I don't want to get married again. Not ever."

"Then what's so dire you can't tell me in public?"

"I slept with Larry last night." There, I'd done it. I'd said the words. I sat back and waited for the explosion.

Which didn't come. Instead, Charlie put his hand on mine. "I knew there was something! You're wearing a slightly different expression today, one that I haven't seen before. Was it good?"

I blew out a breath and crossed the fingers of my unengaged hand. "Yes."

"Is that the end of us?"

"I don't want it to be."

"Is Larry moving in?"

"No. Nothing's changed. I don't want to get married, and I don't want to live with anybody either. Larry feels the same way. We're still just close friends and the only difference will be that once in a while we'll spend the night together."

Charlie grinned. "I don't know why all the fuss about telling me. I'm happy for you. And you know where I'm coming from, so you shouldn't have been worried. Any thoughts about how you're going to handle having two boyfriends?"

"I think the three of us should get together and talk about it. We could meet at my house. Or yours. We might get away with that, especially if it's after dark."

Charlie's sexy grin turned evil. "This could be a lot of fun. So, let's not meet after dark. Instead, let's meet in The Maggie, where everybody can see us and wonder." He leaned across, cupped my chin, and tilted my face up for a long, passionate kiss.

A car rolling slowly out of the parking lot hooted. Approvingly.



When I walked back to the office, I expected to see Dane strolling around the reception area wearing his smug little smile and looking as if he had all the answers, no matter what you might ask him. But the only person in view was Anne-Marie. "Where's Dane?" I liked to know where he was, or planned to be, so I could avoid getting trapped in a conversation with him.

"He got a call on his cell right after you went for lunch," Anne-Marie said. "He didn't say where he was going, just that it was important. I'd guess it was probably a client. And he did look kind of excited."

"Who's on the floor?"

Anne-Marie said, "Ross is showing a lot down at Gander Bay. And Paul is in Victoria, pulling strings about that subdivision he wants to do. Which leaves you."

"Lucky, lucky me," I said. "Okay, I'll be in my office, studying listings and dreaming up sales pitches."

Mondays hardly ever turn out to be good days for prospective clients to wander in. I spent a quiet afternoon with the listings, able to concentrate now that I'd been assured that Charlie still loved me.

Five o'clock rolled around and Anne-Marie poked her head in. "Time to lock up, Brenda."

"Might as well," I said. "There was so little action today that we didn't need to bother unlocking." I grabbed my bag, Anne-Marie dealt with the office door, and the blue Honda took me home to DeeCee.

She happily accepted a share of my halibut steak, then wandered back to her usual post, the top of the sideboard in the dining room. Since I'd agreed to adopt her, some six months before, I'd offered her soft chairs, soft pillows, and even half my double bed, but she'd have none of

those. DeeCee preferred the unyielding fumed oak of the old sideboard and I'd given up trying to pry the reason out of her furry head.

By seven-thirty, I'd tidied the kitchen and was trying to decide whether to read blogs on the computer, or my current murder mystery, or watch something on TV. The mystery might have won, but I was too tired to focus and too restless to sit still. I'd go for a walk and give my mind the space to wrestle with my own life.

Accordingly, I slung on a scruffy plaid jacket, which had lovely deep pockets for tissues and keys and snacks and cold hands, and headed for Deception Bay beach. A paved walkway ran from the Wayfarer Hotel on the southeast curve of the bay, west to where Parsons River emptied onto the sand and interrupted the walkway. I'd cross the river via the highway bridge, find the path again, and continue north another half mile to Tweedsmuir Point, where Deception Bay became the Georgia Strait. About a mile and a little bit from the hotel. And the same distance back, which would be a little over two miles and should be a long enough walk to clear the cobwebs out of my mind. Then I could drop in at The Maggie and see if Larry was there. If not, George would be taking the late shift, and I could play crib with him for an hour before heading home.

Dawdling along felt like a great idea, and dusk had fallen by the time I reached the Point. It wasn't dark yet, though the sun was now merely a glow on the western horizon. The village had recently installed a few lights on the path, so I wouldn't have any trouble walking back.

I leaned on the guardrail at the end of the walkway, lulled by gentle waves lapping at the foot of some fifteen feet of tumbled rockfall. Seagulls had muted their raucous calls to sleepy-sounding chatter as they sought perches for the night, and the traffic noise from the highway, half a mile away, was only a restless background murmur. It was the perfect time and place for a loner like me. I tried to imagine, as I sometimes did, what it would be like to be a hermit, to camp in a cabin up in the mountains and come out to civilization perhaps once a month or so to buy food.

But I'd never live that way. It wasn't that I hated people. Actually, I liked them, but in small bites. Just not in my face all the time. Or in my house except when invited. Most of the time I was quite happy with my own company. I straightened up and tucked my hands in my pockets. There were good friends I enjoyed spending time with, such as Larry and Charlie, but the walk hadn't inspired any ideas about how to do that with both of them without hitting the local headlines.

As I turned to head back, a flash of white in the dark sea caught my eye. When I focused to get another look, it had disappeared. Then caught a glimpse again as the slow swell of waves tumbled it over. Now it was gone again. Probably a sheet of paper. Well, I had no desire to swim out there into deep water and retrieve it, even if I did hate the idea of the ocean being full of junk.

I looked across the bay at the twinkling lights of the Wayfarer Hotel. Larry might have some ideas about how I could handle having two boyfriends. He knew Charlie's secret and would be sympathetic with the problem. The Maggie was never very full on a Monday night, so maybe we'd have a chance to talk as well as play crib.

It was nearly ten o'clock when I strolled into the bar and, as I'd guessed, the place wasn't busy. I counted ten people, most of whom I recognized, and slowly made my way toward my usual stool at the bar.

Larry stood behind the bar, apparently looking at something on a shelf underneath, but I knew he kept a book hidden there. He was tall and fit, like Charlie, and his hair was wavy, too,

but that's where the resemblance ended. Larry's hair was a medium brown, cut to slightly above his collar, and in the right light, glinted a suggestion of auburn, whereas Charlie's was black and shorter. And Larry's eyes were hazel, not brown. Both men were good-looking, but totally different in style. Charlie deliberately played up his male sexiness. Larry seemed to drift along, casual and relaxed, always watching the world, but not interested in having it watch him.

I couldn't help grinning. Was I lucky or what? I had two boyfriends. Two gorgeous guys who cared about me. Two! But would I be able to keep them both?

Larry looked up and flashed me a smile that could have set fire to an ice cube. I tamped down the response from the several billion nerve ends inhabiting my body and climbed onto the stool.

Thirty seconds later, he slid my gin and tonic across the bar, and I noted he'd been extra generous with the lemon wheels. "How'd it go at work today?" he asked.

He never asked stock questions like that, so I knew he was either nervous or had something serious on his mind.

"Fairly boring," I said. "Nothing happened, except me drinking lots of coffee to stay awake."

"Short on sleep, were you?" He had a twinkle in his eye, but it didn't go as far as his mouth. That's when I knew for sure there was something on his mind.

"As a matter of fact, yes," I said, and twinkled back. I took a long, slow sip of the gin and tonic. I'd limit myself to one drink tonight because I needed to get to sleep early. I had appointments with clients the next morning and a meeting of the Amazon Club in the evening. "The waking hours were terrifically well spent, though."

"Glad to hear you hit the jackpot." Larry polished a glass that was already gleaming. "Because there may not be many more such hours." His expression was only a fraction off grim.

That shook me. What could have happened? For a few seconds I wondered if he was angry with me, but I discarded that idea fast. The smile he'd greeted me with had told me everything I wanted to know. I opened my mouth to ask what he meant, but shut it again when he strode out from behind the bar to take orders from two new customers who had wandered in and settled down at a table near the fireplace.

When he'd served their drinks, he came back and pulled out the crib board. I cut a card, won the deal, and murmured, "What's wrong?"

Larry discarded two cards into the crib pile and said, "Elizabeth is considering selling the hotel to developers who want to replace it with a condominium."

My jaw must have dropped because Larry gave me a warning glance. "Nobody is allowed to know yet," he said.

"But you do!"

"She told George and Sam and me, that's all."

Sell the Wayfarer? How could she even think of doing such a thing? The hotel had been the centerpiece of Deception Bay forever. Well, nearly a hundred years, anyway. Elizabeth's grandfather had built and run it. Then her father. And now her. Larry had worked in it off and on since he was in his teens. At least half my social life happened in the bar or the Blueback Grill.

"Why would she do that?"

Larry put down a five to match mine and pegged two points for himself. "She turned sixty-five last week," he said in a low voice, "and she says she's getting tired."

"Doesn't she have family that would take it over?" I knew she'd been married and widowed years back. I'd never heard of her having any children, which made me fairly sure none existed. The grapevine was too efficient to have missed that sort of basic information.

"No kids," he said. "No nephews or nieces, either."

"But that's awful," I said. "That would mean you're out of a job, too."

"Yeah."

There wasn't much else he could say. I glanced around, looking at the crackling fire, the oak paneling, the blue and green-striped wallpaper above it, remembering the old wallpaper of big red roses that had disappeared a few years ago. I glanced at the wide windows, which had a view of the Strait and the Coast Mountains, but it was too dark to see anything. That didn't matter; I knew that view as well as I did the similar one from my own living room. Damn, she couldn't sell. This place was my second home!

"Who's the developer? Is it somebody local?" I'd kill Dane Soper if he had anything to do with this scheme.

Larry shook his head, gathered up the cards and shuffled them in preparation for another hand. "She said it's somebody from the mainland. I'm not even sure why she told us, because she hasn't made a decision yet."

"Maybe because you three have worked here the longest, she was bouncing the idea off you, to see what you came up with."

He shrugged. "Could be, I guess. George is stunned; he's been working the bar for thirty-odd years and, with his back trouble, there's not much else he can do. Sam doesn't like the idea of the hotel disappearing, but he says he's going to retire in a couple of years, so it wouldn't matter that much to him."

I didn't have any answers, only questions. And it did not seem the right time to ask Larry for ideas on dealing with my soon-to-be-wrecked reputation. We played one more game while I finished my drink.

"I'll go home and sleep on it," I said, sliding off the stool.

His brief smile was full of warmth, but his face settled immediately back into an expression far more sober than he usually wore. "Sweet dreams! If you can, dream up some way of saving The Maggie."

Half an hour later, I slid into my bed, wishing I could actually do as he asked. Larry worked there, and he loved the place. Where could he go if the hotel was destroyed?

Chapter 2 Larry sweats

I watched Brenda stroll out of the bar, her blonde hair brushing against the shoulders of that familiar plaid jacket, wishing I could go with her to hash over the latest news. Preferably on adjoining pillows. However, much as I wanted to repeat last night's events, that would have to wait for a day or two, or maybe longer. I didn't get off until around one-thirty and she'd be asleep long before then.

The fire was getting low, but closing the bar was an hour and a half away, so I put a couple more small logs on to feed the flames. Half a dozen people still sat around talking quietly. I'd turned the TV off at their request. I renewed their drinks and went back to my corner.

The book I had stashed under the bar counter was the first of an old science fiction series by David Eddings. I liked his writing but tonight I couldn't concentrate on it. All I seemed able to do was look around the bar, reliving old memories, and wondering how I'd survive without this place.

The Maggie was home. She'd supported me through the last two years of high school and then the three years of college that had taken me nearly six years to complete. She was also my refuge when my marriage hit the skids, though I had to admit she was part of the reason for the break-up. My ex-wife said tending bar was a nowhere job and Deception Bay had to be the least happening place in the world. She wanted me in Vancouver, in suit and tie, briefcase in hand, finishing my last year of college, then starting the long climb up some corporate ladder.

I leaned my elbows on the bar and wondered how I'd ever imagined I could fit into Joy's scenario. But I guess whoever said love was blind had been right. Or what I'd thought was true love maybe had just been sex. This past summer I'd toyed with the idea of finishing my degree, saving some money, and traveling the world like people kept telling me I should do. But, after kicking it around for a while, I realized I was no traveler either.

Not in real time, anyway. Whenever I'd imagined dealing with trains, airports, taxis, and hotels with bedbugs or something worse, I realized that I could travel almost anywhere on the planet via television, the internet, and the library, and do it in the comfort of my favorite chair. No need to shake the sand out of my shoes at the end of each day. Or deal with flu bugs wafted around by the air-conditioning on airplanes, or cope with any of the other problems I'd heard about from local travelers while I tended bar.

Now, maybe I'd be forced to travel, to Breslow every day. The only other place in the village that might need a bartender was an old pub on Highway 12, the Rod & Reel, and I wasn't keen on working there. The Maggie got her share of drunks, but they were usually the kind who merely raised their voices a little or staggered a trifle on their way out. The Rod & Reel was well known for noisy fights.

There was no hope of a job with the two chartered accountants who shared an office in the Georgia Mall. Ferris Denver often dropped in for a drink on Friday nights and I'd heard him complain that they didn't have quite enough clients to keep him and Cliff Jones busy. Anyway, if they were going to hire somebody, they'd likely want somebody with a degree.

I took another look around the bar and tried to stop imagining the worst. Elizabeth had only said she was thinking about selling, not that she was going to. Maybe it wouldn't happen, and I could go on being a witness to the assorted problems of Deception Bay's citizens and trying to figure out what made them tick. I listened to happy tales, sad sagas, and mad rants, and got both shoulders soaked in tears on a regular basis. I liked to think that being a good listener had helped

at least a few people get their heads on straight. And from getting into any more trouble than they already were.

The flames in the fireplace flared up and crackled as they gleefully ate a pocket of sap. Lights appeared in the picture window and, after a moment, I recognized the outline of a cruise ship heading south. Now, near the end of September, there wouldn't be many more on this part of the coast until early spring. Winter rains were about to settle in.

The rain wouldn't bother me. What I needed to do was find out why Elizabeth was tired, why she was tempted to give up a business that had been in her family for such a long time. Find out why she could even think of destroying something that made Deception Bay what it was, something that was the focus of so much village life.

Maybe I was wrong. Maybe the Wayfarer Inn was just the focus of my own life.

The last of my customers left and I walked around the bar, tidying chairs and wiping tables. I put away the crib board, restocked the bar, and organized the cooler, so that George would find the place in readiness when he opened in the morning. I counted the cash, did the tally, sealed the envelope, and walked out into the lobby to slide it through the slot in Elizabeth's office door.

At ten after one, I took off the black waistcoat and black tie, slid into my windbreaker, and headed out the front door. It took roughly twenty minutes to walk along the bay and then up the hill to my apartment. The breeze off the sea was light, and I thought it smelled like autumn. Then I wondered what made autumn smell like autumn. So, like the writer I was pretending I wanted to be, I tried to find the right words but, after a minute, I gave up. I could say the breeze smelled like home, which was close enough for now. The only thing I could hope for at the moment was that this place went on being home.

Would I be able to sleep? Another question without an answer. Anyway, I didn't have to be at work until five in the afternoon. I thought about messing with the short story that had been stuck on page two for better than a week, but the brain flatly refused to go there. It told me to shut up and go to bed because I had to do several things next day, like getting Elizabeth to talk to me. My brain had been telling me what to do since I was a teenager and learning to play poker. It was almost never wrong. So I shut up and went to bed.



Surprisingly, I slept well. Maybe that's because my brain seems to be divided into compartments. Some of them hold secrets and are locked. Some hold problems, like when I might find time to do my laundry, or what I'd do if I lost my job, but apparently, I was able to lock those, too, at least temporarily. After all, there wasn't a thing I could do about the job at 2 a.m. Or the laundry, either, unless I felt like annoying a few people.

While absorbing my first mug of coffee, I phoned Elizabeth, and she said I could stop in and talk to her before I went on shift at five. That made me feel hopeful. Maybe she didn't actually want to sell. Maybe she just needed somebody to listen to her problems.

I'd barely disconnected when my mom phoned. "I've got the day off," she said. "If you haven't had breakfast yet, I'll make you some."

"That's great! I'll be there in ten minutes." I hadn't seen Mom for a week or so and it was time I checked in. Besides, I never knew what surprise might be on the plate she put in front of me. She followed very few conventions and had very few rules, except that everyone should be responsible for themselves and what they did, especially her two sons.

Her little old house was only four blocks away. The outside looked tidy because my dad had fenced the yard to keep Steve and me penned up when we were tiny, and my mother loved her garden. Inside the house, they'd gotten no farther than updating the kitchen when my dad was killed in an accident at work. Mom started her job at the hardware and Steven, who was sixteen, worked at The Wayfarer while he finished school. I'd been twelve, so I just kept going to school and doing chores and missing my dad.

I rapped at the front door and walked in. My mother stuck her head out of the kitchen doorway and said, "Get your ass into the chair; this stuff is done just right." She put down plates for each of us.

"What is it? Roast beef?"

"No," she said, "it's deer meat. Jack Finley gave me a big roast."

The venison and its accompanying gravy were piled over mashed potatoes. "Nice! Looks like the fancy lunch dish they do at the Blueback Grill, except they put the meat and gravy over a bun."

"What's the point of the bun when you've got leftover mashed spuds?"

"No point at all," I said, and went to work on the deer. I definitely wouldn't need any lunch before going to work. "How are things at the hardware?"

"About as usual. Nothing exciting."

She was wearing a short-sleeved shirt and slacks, the same as she wore at work, except there was no store emblem stitched to the breast pocket. There were never any surprises in the way she looked: slim, bright-eyed, permed brown hair, no make-up.

"Any family news?" I remembered my manners and added, "This food is delicious." She had also piled way too much on my plate, still feeding me like I was a growing boy.

"Just Susan, as usual," Mom said.

"What's her problem now?" Susan was my cousin, four or five years older than me and married to a gentle giant named Buck Strachan, a logger, like my dad had been.

"She says Buck doesn't pay her enough attention and he talks mean to her. She's been saying that for a while now."

"Buck? Really? I can't imagine him talking mean to anybody."

"Neither can I," Mom said. "My sister spoiled Susan rotten, and I figure the girl is still looking to be spoiled." She paused. "But you never know what goes on behind closed doors. Maybe he's not as easy-going as he looks."

"That's true. You want me to talk to Buck?"

She shook her head. "No. Let's not interfere. Give it some time. Maybe he'll get her pregnant and she'll settle down. She needs something to do besides sit around the house all day."

We were silent for a few minutes while we mopped up the last of the gravy with mashed potatoes.

"It's about time you settled down," my mother said.

"The divorce hasn't come through yet."

She dropped her knife and fork onto the plate, with a clatter. "That bitch! She figured she was going to wear the pants and that was that."

"I know. Too bad she tried to wear mine, too."

"You don't have to wait for a divorce before you start seeing other people."

I decided to give in. My mother is as persistent as a cat stalking a mouse. "I had a date with Brenda Batchelor a couple of nights ago."

"Why her, for God's sake? She's older than you."

"So what?"

"She'll soon be too old to want kids."

"I'm not planning on marrying her."

"Aren't you going to give me any grandchildren?"

"Steven's given you two. How many do you want?"

Mom glared at me. "As many as I can get. That's my reward for putting up with you two when you were snotty little brats."

"Maybe Steven and Lila will have some more. I tried the marriage and domesticity bit and didn't like it."

Maybe it was the firmness in my tone that made her switch tactics. "I know for sure Brenda's about ten years older than you. Beth and Gavin and her came to visit a month or two after I had you. She musta been nine or ten. She looked after you while we had coffee and cake. In fact, I think she changed your diapers."

That made me laugh. "I'll have to ask her if she remembers."

Since she'd failed to embarrass me, Mom changed the subject and went on to more family gossip. I listened until she started to wind down, then went back home to do my laundry.



I walked the five blocks down the hill, soaking up the late afternoon September sunshine, picked up a coffee from Wing's Grocery and shot the breeze for five minutes with Mary before strolling along the waterfront walkway to the hotel. The tide was out, and I kept glancing at that smooth sand beach stretching out to little, white-frothed waves a quarter of a mile away. I told myself that I should spend more time on it. Instead, I'd chosen to make my living inside, slinging beer.

That thought irritated me enough that I quit looking at the beach. After all, I could see it from the bar simply by glancing up. I didn't have to live on it, and I didn't want to be a fisherman. But I did have to have a job, because I sure as hell wasn't going to move back in with my mother and sponge off her.

Rather than go in through the back door at ground level and ride the elevator to the next level, I walked up the driveway and went in through the big double doors at the front. I waved at Sam, the dapper desk clerk, who was fiddling with paperwork, walked across the lobby, and rapped on Elizabeth's office door.

When I walked in, she was leaning forward in her state-of-the-art swivel chair, fiddling with papers which littered the old-fashioned oak desk. It was so battered it might have been there since the hotel had been built. Late afternoon sunlight beamed in through the tall, narrow windows that faced out over the driveway. It looked like a comfortable, pleasant place to work, even if it didn't have a sea view.

Bernie, her Leonberger dog, got up from his place beside her desk and came over to nuzzle my hand. A cross between Newfoundland and Saint Bernard, plus some Great Pyrenees, and possibly a little musk ox thrown in for good measure, he was a giant of his breed, weighing in at nearly 170 pounds. So, when he showed his affection by placing his front paws on my feet, I couldn't help saying "Ow!"

"Bernie, lie down!" Elizabeth said sharply. The dog removed himself from my feet and slumped back down on the floor, heaving a long, sad sigh at the tragedy of being forbidden to break my toes. Elizabeth walked to work with him every morning, so he could have a good run

on the beach and, while she usually gave him a brushing before she brought him up to her office, his thick, shaggy, lion-colored body coat still had a few leaves tangled in it. His black face mask, however, was clean and his brown eyes gazed hopefully up at me. I took a treat from my pocket and gave it to him.

"You spoil that animal," Elizabeth said tartly.

"People say honey attracts more bees than vinegar. I'm just trying to keep him sweet for when you want me to dog-sit." Sometimes Elizabeth left him in the hotel when she went on errands, often with either George or me riding herd on him. He didn't like being left alone and would try to destroy her office if she didn't make sure he had company.

Elizabeth loved dogs, but I'd never seen her fuss over them, and they obviously had no doubt that she was boss. She had a slightly formal air with people, too. Her blue eyes were bright, and her glance was direct, sometimes challenging. Short reddish-brown hair and a slim build made her look far younger than her years. That is, if you didn't notice, now and again, the hint of gray roots along the part.

The formality extended to her clothing, too. She wore her reading glasses on a chain around her neck and I'd never seen her in anything but nice dresses and polished shoes. I wondered if she ever went for jeans and tees when nobody was looking.

She leaned back in her chair and tapped one arm of her blue-framed glasses on her chin.

"So, Larry, what do you think about my selling to a developer?"

It wasn't possible to lie to Elizabeth. "I don't like it. I love this place. Deception Bay wouldn't be Deception Bay without the Wayfarer."

"Be logical. Deception Bay will always be Deception Bay, no matter what sits on this particular piece of land. Or it will until the next time glaciers cover the coast." She paused. "But I understand. This place is home to you, like it is to me."

I leaned forward. "You told me yesterday that you're tired. Do you need to hire help?"

"Perhaps I'm working too hard. The cliché 'the buck stops here' applies. This is my building and my business, and I have to be available to deal with problems 24/7. Sometimes I get tired of all the responsibilities. And three million dollars is tempting. It would provide me with a luxurious old age."

Elizabeth was being very up front with me. Why? I wondered if she simply wanted to be talked out of selling the property. Perhaps she had no one else who she could discuss it with. "Why don't you take a break, go away for a few weeks and rest?" After all, she'd been going away for a week at Christmas every year and for another in the summer for as long as I could remember.

She raised her eyebrows. "Who would run the place for that long?" But it seemed to run itself when she was away for a week, though that was probably because most of her staff had worked there for years. And one week goes by quickly.

I'd already thought about that. "George and Sam and me. Sam can deal with guests. George and I already run the bar, and I can do the accounting."

"Yes," Elizabeth said, nodding, "I know you're only a year short of a degree. You'd have to learn my system, though, which dates from somewhere around the Dark Ages. I'm sure you've never seen anything like it."

"It doesn't matter what it looks like. All accounting systems have the same purpose."

She eyed me thoughtfully. "I wonder if a few weeks away would work. I have considered hiring an assistant, but allowing a stranger to make decisions would keep me awake at night."

Did I dare say it? "You want to keep total control?"

Elizabeth looked startled. Then she frowned at me for a second. Bernie sensed some change in the emotional climate and raised his head up off his front paws. When Elizabeth leaned back in her chair, shifting her shoulders in a way that told me she was trying to relax, Bernie put his head down again and shut his eyes. A moment went by, and I wondered if I was going to get fired right now. At least Bernie wasn't going to eat me for upsetting his pack leader.

Then she gave me a wry smile. "Touché. I've been in total control for so long, I don't know how to give it up. Maybe it has to be all or nothing."

"You don't control the Blueback Grill, though. It's leased, right?"

"Yes, it is, and that's working fine. But I've known James since he was in diapers."

She'd known me that long, too. Would the fact make a difference in whether or not she trusted someone?

Deception Bay was a tight little village. Or it used to be; in the last few years, outsiders had discovered the place and begun retiring here. In just a few more years, it would be a big village, maybe even a small town. Which was another reason, to my mind, why it was important to keep The Wayfarer as a sort of anchor to local history. Or was I being unduly sentimental? Would other people feel the same?

"Any more ideas, Larry?"

Startled out of my reflections, I shook my head. "No, but I'm sure I can speak for George and Sam when I say we'd be willing to take over if you want to get away for a while."

"I will give your comments due consideration," she said, and rose. "Here's another thought for when you have The Wayfarer in mind. Don't cry because something is over but smile because it happened."

The advice was good, sound, and solid. But it didn't make me feel any better. I knew I'd been dismissed, so I scratched Bernie on the top of his head and left, closing the door softly behind me.

In the bar, George was tidying up in preparation for me taking the evening shift. I relayed my conversation with Elizabeth as I put on my black vest and tie.

He pondered it while he cleaned the small sink. "You don't suppose she's getting senile, do you? Like wanting to shake everybody up and get some attention? Could be the Chamber of Commerce doesn't appreciate her like it should."

"No. There's nothing wrong with her brain. I suspect it's the prospect of getting three mil in cash that's got her going. I suggested she could hire an assistant but that went over like a lead balloon."

George rubbed his jaw. "We could try getting a group together to buy the place."

"And elect ourselves as management?"

"Sure. Why not?"

"Why not is because there are no more than a couple of people around here with that kind of money to invest," I said.

"Toby Anderson, for one." George shrugged into his jacket. "Yeah, we'd have to look outside the village, for sure. If she's been offered three million for the land, she'd want more than that to hand the place over as a profitable operation."

"Yes," I said, "but big investors from Vancouver and Victoria wouldn't want us as management. They'd want to bring in their own people."

George put his hand on my shoulder for a second. "Well, don't sweat it. Nothing's happened yet. She hasn't accepted the developer's offer."

"She hasn't said no, either," I grumbled.

"Don't waste your time worrying," George said. "It takes an awful lot of energy and never does any good." He glanced at his watch. "And speaking of worrying, I gotta get home or Eileen will chew me out."

There was nobody in the bar, but that would quickly change as people began dropping in after work and guests came in for a drink before dinner. But I might have a few minutes to myself so, while I set a match to the paper and kindling George had arranged in the fieldstone fireplace, I started imagining how awful it would be to have The Wayfarer razed to the ground and tall, square boxes in its place.

If I had my way, though, there'd be a bronze plaque, maybe beside the front door of one of those boxes, or attached to a concrete monument, commemorating the hotel and the Hamilton family who built it. I'd write a story about the place and get it printed up as a brochure and put stacks of them in the lobby of the biggest square box. It would be a kind of welcome letter to the new residents of Deception Bay, telling them a little about the history of the village, the bay, and the hotel, and about some of the quirks that all of these had. It might be fun for these newcomers to discover what life here had to offer. The hotel had been home to me and quite a few others. Maybe the land and its tall boxes would be home to a lot more people.

By the time my imaginings got this far, I realized just how much I didn't want any of that to happen. I felt like putting my head down on the bar and shedding those tears I'd told myself weren't warranted as of yet. I'd been stupid to let my imagination run away with me like that. Then I reminded myself that imagination is where stories come from. But I certainly didn't feel like writing a story about the Wayfarer disappearing.

Before I could indulge in any more stupid trips to the future, Jerry from the lumberyard came in and plunked himself at the bar. His red hair and freckles made him look way too young to have the wife and children he bragged about.

"What'll it be, Jerry?"

"Pour me a Blue. And have one yourself."

That task accomplished, Jerry took a long pull at his glass, relaxed his shoulders, and heaved a big sigh. "You remember Hank got sent to the psych ward in Victoria after those wasps attacked him?"

"Yep." Brenda and I had never figured out whether Gina put the wasps into his car or if they'd been attracted by his lunch bag. The point was, though, that Hank had a bad phobia about wasps.

"Well," Jerry said, "he got released. I don't know if they cured him, but he wrote to the boss asking if he could have his old job back."

"Excuse me a sec." Four people had come in and I fixed their drinks order.

When I was back behind the bar, I asked, "Is Amos going to take him back?"

Jerry shook his head. "Nah. Amos didn't take kindly to Hank knocking him down when he was lashing out against the wasps. He don't forgive easy, Amos."

I was sure Gina wouldn't, either, since Hank was one of her rapists. "So, what's Hank doing? Where's he staying?"

"At the YMCA, I think. Amos hollered that on his way out the door with a customer and there were so many people yakking in the store, I could hardly hear. But I'm pretty sure that's what he said." Jerry pushed his glass across the bar to me. "Gimme the other wing. Then I gotta fly."

I poured him another Blue and wondered whether Gina's brothers had been in the store and whether she'd get to hear where Hank was. I did a lot of wondering about Gina and the five guys

who'd raped her. The only reason I knew who they were was because one of them, the young banker, had made a drunken confession to me moments before he got on a bus to head back to Calgary. Gina not only refused to tell Brenda who the guys were, but also whether she'd committed any acts of revenge, so we'd probably never know if she put the wasps in Hank's car. It made me happy to imagine her doing it, though.

Jerry's voice yanked me back to the present. "You playing any poker these days?"

"I'm taking a break for a while. Want to see if I can write stories well enough to sell them." I'd made up that excuse so I wouldn't have to play poker with Dane and Josh, two of the rapists, but I was finding out that I liked writing. Not as much as I liked gambling, maybe, but poker would have to wait until I found somebody else to play with.

"Well, if you want to get back in the game, let me know," Jerry said.

"Ok, thanks, I will." He was obviously still playing poker with Dane and Josh and, just as obviously, didn't know what pricks they were.



By seven-thirty, the sun had sunk barely below the horizon, leaving a strip of purplish red along the sky at the edge of the ocean. I stoked up the fire and cleaned off tables in preparation for the evening drinkers. By eight, a dozen of the locals were comfortably settled in, hashing over the latest news from the Parliament buildings in Victoria or watching the baseball game on the TV in one corner.

I opened the Eddings novel on the shelf hidden below the bar and took out the bookmark, hoping to keep my mind off whether I'd still have a job three months down the road. But I didn't make it through the first paragraph before two more customers walked in and plunked down.

These two sure weren't locals, so they might be hotel guests. He was taller than average at about six feet and she wasn't far behind, but so thin she looked like she'd snap in two if you touched her. They were in their late fifties or early sixties. By the time I reached the table they'd chosen, I'd decided they were tourists, doing their traveling now that kids were back in school and wouldn't clutter up the scenery.

"What can I get you?"

The guy gave me one of those tight-lipped little smiles that didn't reach as far as his eyes and said, "I'll have a Blue Lagoon."

The woman said, "Make mine an Agua Fresca."

The guy turned to her and said, "Why don't you have a real drink?"

"I don't need the calories, Ward. Besides, an Agua Fresca is delightfully refreshing."

"Coming right up," I said. I headed back to the bar, digging through my mind for the recipes. Luckily, that section of the brain wasn't locked. As I reached for two highball glasses, I wondered if the guy was in the habit of challenging barkeeps. Maybe not, maybe I was just being touchy because of the possibility of losing my job in The Maggie. Another unlocked part of the brain kicked in and told me I was totally in a rut if I couldn't imagine working anywhere else.

In the meantime, I had to build two drinks. First, ice cubes in his glass, then two ounces each of vodka and blue curacao liqueur, topped off with a splash of lemonade and maraschino cherries. Very pretty drink. Hers was mostly watermelon juice over crushed ice, a smidgen of lemon juice and simple syrup, with a wedge of lime on the glass. Both were reminiscent of the Caribbean; could be that's where they'd just come from.

I gave the lady her drink first, of course, then placed his on the coaster. He took a sip, then produced a smile that looked real. "Perfect," he said. "Couldn't have done better myself."

Squelching the urge to say, 'effing right you couldn't,' I gave him my version of the tight-lipped smile and said, "Thank you. Anything else I can get you?"

"I don't suppose you have any macadamia nuts?"

"Of course," I said. "I'll bring a bowlful." Okay, so maybe they'd been to Hawaii, not the Caribbean.

As I walked toward them with the macadamias, I paid closer attention to their clothes. Sometimes, clothes tell me more about a person than what they say. She was wearing skinny jeans, a black tee, a leather jacket with a phony fur collar, and black ankle boots. Long red hair, obviously dyed, fell over her shoulders nearly to her waist. She'd also been wearing a smile ever since they'd come in and I wondered what she was covering up with the happy mask. A need for something, perhaps. Maybe a divorce? Or perhaps to prove she wasn't past her 'best before' date.

Ward apparently liked to wear his money. I'd noticed the Rolex and now I saw the heavy gold chain around his neck, the diamond pinkie ring, and the cashmere sweater. His jacket was also leather, of course. His hair might be dyed, too, but he hadn't taken equal care of his body. The fat wasn't blatant, but it did protrude a bit here and there: under the chin, bulging his waistband, puffing his jowls.

I set the bowl and a supply of napkins on the table.

"Thanks," he said. "I'm surprised to find somebody in this jerkwater little town that knows how to mix a drink."

I repeated my tight little smile. "Tourists from every part of the world come here to play on our expanse of sandy beach, sir. And to play golf at Seven Oaks, a couple of miles north of town. We've learned how to cater to our guests."

"It's a lovely, lovely beach and..." the woman began, but the guy cut her off.

"You're behind the times on exploiting real estate, though. The property this old hotel sits on is a gold mine. Condominium units overlooking that beach would sell for millions."

That felt like a solid punch to the gut. Was this the greedy developer who wanted to buy the property from Elizabeth?

He was still talking. "Would be good to have a bar on the beach, though. Tourists in the summer, condo owners all year. I'll keep you in mind."

This was the guy all right. I started thinking it was too bad I didn't have any strychnine behind the bar. A few drops in his Blue Lagoon and the problem would vanish instantly. Well, not quite instantly. And it would probably be ugly to watch.

Chapter 3 Brenda and the Amazons

When I walked into the office Tuesday midmorning, after an early appointment to show some property halfway down to Breslow, Anne-Marie greeted me with a worried frown. "Do you know where Dane is?"

"No idea."

"I just thought he might have called you. He had an appointment with a client at nine a.m. and he didn't show. That's not like him."

I had to agree. If there was a commission in sight, no matter how dim or far away, Dane always showed up.

Anne-Marie moved a piece of paper from one side of her desk to the other. "Ross was here, so he took care of the client. And I've phoned Dane's house several times but there's no answer."

"Maybe he's shacked up with somebody and is still asleep."

"Brenda!" Anne-Marie looked horrified. "How can you even think such a thing? Trish only left him a couple of weeks ago. He's grieving."

"Sorry, but I have a strong feeling Dane would turn to other women for comfort." Even if he had to drug them first, like what happened to Gina.

"You're totally wrong, Brenda. You obviously don't understand men." Anne-Marie gave me a pitying look. "If you did, you and Charlie would be married by now."

I had no come-back for that, so I said, "There's nothing else you can do. Except ask Paul or Ross to go over to the house and see if Dane's ill or hurt. Maybe he fell down his front steps." I hoped he had, and that he'd broken at least one leg, but I didn't dare say so. Anne-Marie didn't mind if I had opinions, but she always told me when they were wrong, or insisted on knowing why I had the particular ones that I admitted to.

"Do you think I should call the cops?"

I'd had a brief chat about missing persons with Nick Demaratus, the local RCMP sergeant, a few years before. "It seems to me they don't do anything until the person has been gone twenty-four hours. Or it could be forty-eight. I forget."

"Oh." Anne-Marie sighed. She hated uncertainty. "Maybe he got a call from Trish about his son. Maybe he had to go to Vancouver."

If that were true, he could have phoned the office to let us know where he was. But I didn't want to contribute to Anne-Marie's worry, so decided against sharing the thought. "If so, then he'll probably turn up tomorrow." I headed toward my cubbyhole. "Sorry to leave you with the problem, but I have to go back out right away. I have an appointment to look at a possible new listing."



At seven-fifteen in the evening I climbed into the Honda again and headed for the Amazon Club meeting at Toby's place. My day had been productive; I'd signed up the old couple who wanted to sell their beachfront house, and taken plenty of photographs. I gave way to a momentary fit of superstition and crossed my fingers that Ward and Gwendolyn Best would buy it. They probably wouldn't like the old-fashioned house, even though it had been updated and was quite livable, but the land itself and the view of the Strait were what they said they were looking for.

It would be perfect to get both the listing and selling commissions for the place. If that happened, I'd make enough to pay off the bank loan on the Honda. "Don't count your chickens," I muttered as I drove down Toby's long driveway and parked beside a couple of other cars in front of her elegant three-story house. It was old, too, but looked as though it had not only been updated, but pampered to perfection. I was dying to have a look at the interior but hadn't been granted that privilege yet.

The air smelled of rain, but the path that skirted Toby's house and led to the A-frame she called her studio was dusty and the leaves shed by the arbutus trees around the little building rustled and crunched underfoot. I hoped the rain would come and pour down for a week. We'd had an unusually hot, rainless summer and only one short storm early in September. The forest that grew over most of the island was tinder-dry and all it would take to set the trees ablaze was just one carelessly tossed cigarette, or just one lightning strike.

In the foyer, I took my white, terrycloth monk's robe off its hook, slipped it on over my jeans and tee, and kicked my sandals into the corner. I walked into the large, airy main room, which had many tall, narrow windows, a fireplace and, in the center of the room, a long refectory table surrounded by comfortable leather chairs. Rondo, Toby's black Himalayan cat, was curled up asleep in the shallow basin of the altar, which stood to one side of the fireplace. Toby herself was lighting seven white candles in the candelabra on the table. The seven glass goblets already each contained a mouthful of white wine.

I greeted her, admiring again her priestess gear, a sleeveless, floor-length white silk gown with a boat neck and a sash snugging it to her waist. As usual, she wore no jewelry except for the silver bow and arrow brooch above her left breast.

"Your brooch is crooked," she said.

It usually was. My interest in the group centered on the discussions, which leaned heavily to feminism and its history, not the costumes or rituals. I'd only come to a few meetings since Toby asked me to join and I still didn't know whether I wanted to stay. I could see that some of the women found it rewarding to pretend they were fierce, warlike Amazons, but my karate skills gave me plenty of confidence. I didn't need to take on a new persona based on ancient myth. I liked the archery practice on Sunday afternoons, though actually hitting a target was taking a lot more skill than I'd thought it would.

While I adjusted the brooch, I realized Toby's usual smile had been missing from her greeting. Although the light in the room had dimmed because of sunset, I noticed now that her face looked pale and tense. I wondered, of course, what had happened to make her so, but Toby never confided in me. She seemed to hold everyone at arm's length except Midge, but they were old friends and had started the Amazon Club years before when they were in college together.

Within the next few minutes, the other women came in and silence reigned while the opening ritual took place. Each of us picked up a goblet from the table and lined up behind Toby. She gently removed Rondo from the altar, then poured her scant thimbleful of wine into it, saying, "Artemis, virgin huntress, goddess of the moon, we salute you." The rest of us followed, one by one, pouring our wine into the altar basin, and repeating the salutation exactly as Toby had said it.

Now the rule of silence could be broken, and we all greeted one another while Toby filled the goblets. Rondo returned to the altar, wrinkled his nose at the smell of the wine, blinked his big yellow eyes, and retreated to the cushioned bench beneath one of the tall windows. In a few moments, we were all seated around the table, our goblets reflecting the shimmer of flickering candlelight.

It was an interesting group of women. Toby was elegant, wealthy, and appeared to be in perfect control of both her antique business and herself, though I'd learned from club discussions that she'd been sexually molested by her father as a child. Rumor said she hated men. Midge worked a small farm up the highway toward Mount Arrowsmith and ran a shelter for battered women. She was tall, muscular, red-headed, single, and blunt. Rumor, busily tracking down the slightest differences from the norm, insisted she was a lesbian but never provided any evidence.

Phyllis worked as a nurse at Breslow General and Kitty was my massage therapist, both happily married, or so they said. Donna Zacharias was in her mid-twenties, from a family noted for its violence, and a very outspoken jock. She earned her living as a librarian. Gina Benedetti, the same age as Donna, had been a house mouse taking care of her ailing mother before the gang-rape. Now she'd taken charge of her life and was Donna's assistant, using her own salary to pay for professional care for her mother and getting the education she'd wanted for so long.

And me? I didn't really hate anybody—except Gina's rapists—and, after two failed marriages, was happy with my solitary life and minding my own business. I had to admit, at least to Larry and to myself, that I had a strong, healthy curiosity about what other people did, and why they did it. But, since I didn't offer opinions or interfere in any way, I could still claim to mind my own business. I just liked to know what was going on. Maybe it was a reflex action; if I knew what people were doing and could guess what they were thinking, I could keep myself safe. I knew where that thought had come from, but I didn't want to dwell on it.

Toby took a book out of the bag that hung over the back of her chair and placed it on the table. "Have you all had a chance to read this?" It was *Men Explain Things to Me* by Rebecca Solnit. The book had been out for a few years but was still popular.

Midge was the first to reply and I saw that she, like Toby, looked tired and strained. "I read the title essay," she said, "and it was okay, but it didn't tell me anything I didn't already know. A lot of men believe they know more than women do, or ever could, and try to explain things to them."

"I liked it," Gina said. "It made sense to me because my father and brothers all act that way. But I'd never thought about the reasons behind it or as something that happens to all of us."

Toby's smile, when she looked at Gina, was warm, almost motherly. "That's probably because you're young and haven't been exposed to much experience of the wider world. When Midge and I were in college back in the dark ages, we were forever being talked down to by male students and many of our male professors. From what I read in the news, that's still going on."

"I'm the same age as Gina," Donna said, her chin jutting out just a trifle, "and I definitely was aware of how men assume the high ground and think they're entitled to it. I'm glad Solnit quit telling funny stories and got serious, because the real problem is the silencing of women. Like she says, men try to silence women who are screaming for help because they fear for their lives. Or their sanity."

"That needs to be said more often," Midge replied. "I know Donna comes from a dysfunctional family and has experienced violence, but the rest of you should talk to the battered women in my shelter."

Donna's expression was grim. "I'll never go back to the hellhole of my family. I fought my father and uncles all my life and had the bruises and broken bones to prove it."

"My family's not like that," Gina said. "I always thought they were trying to be helpful, even if I did get fed up with being treated like a child. I never complained because it never occurred to them that they were doing anything wrong."

Phyllis spoke up. "My father and my husband don't do mansplaining, but most of my friends have complained. As Gina said, the men who do it have no idea they're doing anything wrong. And that's part of the problem."

"Parents need to teach all their children, both male and female, that patronizing other people is wrong," Kitty said.

"That word 'mansplaining' was coined because of Solnit's book," I said. Sometimes what I learn from doing crossword puzzles comes in handy.

"It's not the mansplaining that's the real problem, though," Toby said. "It's the attitude behind it, that men have such a strong sense of entitlement, that they get to do what they want, and women are expected to adapt to them. That dominant attitude leads to intimidation and sometimes to violence."

"What good does it do to only talk about it?" Donna sounded irritated. "We acknowledge the problem, yes, but what can we actually do about it?"

"Talking about it lets other women know they're not alone," said Midge. "We each have to work on solving the problem however we can. Attitude is not something that can be controlled by legislation; it's the result of the way society evolves. Kitty's right about training children to have respect for everyone, but in my opinion, it's going to take a long time. There are still a good many mothers who value sons over daughters and who perpetuate the old attitudes."

"Talking about violence is supposed to reduce the psychological damage done to women who've suffered it," Toby said. "Maybe I haven't talked about my experience enough because I'm still angry and I'm still bitter. I can't remember any other way of feeling."

"The violence against you went on for a long time, though," Midge said.

"Yes, it did." Toby took a deep breath. "My father began sexually molesting me when I was twelve. I was sixteen before I'd gained enough strength, physically and mentally, to stop him. So I've had nearly thirty years of anger and bitterness."

I wondered how Gina was reacting to this revelation, but she seemed calm. "Toby," I said, "how could you be physically strong enough at sixteen to stop a full-grown man?"

"I had help," she said. "I bought a cutthroat razor, the kind that's about six inches long and folds into the handle. I learned how to use it. And one night, I finally had the guts to defend myself with it. He grabbed my arm and I cut straight across his wrist."

"Ouch!" I couldn't help wincing. "There must have been a lot of blood."

Toby's smile was not pleasant. "Quite a lot. But it stopped him. And I put a lock on the inside of my door."

"Did you tell your mother? What did she think about the lock?" Kitty looked nearly as eager as I was to hear the rest of the story.

"No, I never told my mother. She wouldn't have believed me. She still lives in a clean, pink and blue, pastel world, thinking the best of everyone. I told her I'd been having nightmares about thieves breaking in and killing me and that the lock made the nightmares go away."

Was Gina like Toby's mother? Maybe she'd grown up with a belief in the goodness of people and would keep that belief, even in spite of the rape. Naturally, she didn't regard her rapists as good people, but she apparently believed that her father and brothers and uncles were kind and decent.

Phyllis said to Toby, "Did he ever try to touch you again?"

"Oh, yes! The bastard kept trying, as well as giving me the eye, until he died of cirrhosis of the liver. He was demanding, unrepentant, always looking for a chance to trap me, to catch me without a weapon."

We were all silent for a moment. Then Toby asked, "Did any of you read the other essays in the book?"

This abrupt shift told me that Toby didn't want to relive any more of her past. All I could feel was sympathy. And horror. I'd thought my father was hard on me, but what I'd gone through with him was nothing compared to her experience.

The discussion of Solnit's work went on until nine. Then Toby said, "I hope we've learned something tonight. Let's broaden the discussion at the next meeting. There are other problems with how men and women interact. And I'll choose a new author for the meeting after that. Or one of you can do that, if you have a writer you want to discuss. But let me know soon."

We followed Toby to the altar and poured the dregs of our wine into the altar basin, each repeating the words, "Artemis, protect your handmaidens." Then out into the foyer, where we hung up our robes, donned our shoes, and emerged into the clear star-lit night.

No clouds hid the moon, so there'd be no rain. I was glad to be outside again, though. Usually I enjoyed the quiet studio, where we heard nothing but the sound of our own voices, but this time, I'd felt oppressed. In the car, I sat and thought about that for a moment, puzzled by my reaction, but I couldn't pinpoint why I felt differently than I had before. Was it because of Toby's revelation about her abuse?

Oh, to hell with it! I'd go have a drink with Larry.



Ten minutes later I walked into The Maggie and watched appreciatively as Larry mixed my favorite gin and tonic, with extra lemon slices. He handed it to me less than thirty seconds after I'd climbed onto the stool, along with that special smile that made my nerve ends sizzle.

"Amazon Club tonight?" he asked.

"Yep."

"Any hot gossip?"

"Nope." I'd decided not to talk about Toby's past. Certainly it qualified as gossip, but it was too long ago and, for some reason, I felt uncomfortable about repeating it. Perhaps because I already knew why it had happened, so there was no mental exploration to be done.

"I have some," he said. "Elizabeth left this morning for a month's vacation."

"Good for her! Has she made a decision about the developer's offer? Or gambling that he'll wait around?"

"That's what the vacation is for, probably," Larry said. "Sam and George and I are in charge, and I got a fast lesson in the accounting system before she left."

"Complicated?"

He laughed. "Not in the least. In fact, the physical books are darn near old enough to be in a museum. The check register is huge, bound in black and red, and goes back at least fifteen years. The only difference between it and the general ledger is that the ledger is smaller."

"You'll get your exercise lifting them."

Larry shook his head. "No, I won't. I downloaded the best accounting software I could find onto my laptop, and I'll use that while she's gone."

"Won't she be upset?"

"I don't think so. When she sees how easy it is to do the entries on a computer, and how fast she can get the figures she needs, I'm sure she'll be happy. And maybe that will help her to come to the right decision."

"And that would be...?"

"The hotel stays. The developer goes away."

I took a long sip of the gin and tonic. "I have to agree. Although that decision would eliminate a chance for me to make some big commissions on fancy condos."

"It might," Larry said, "unless the developer hires somebody to be on-site and do the selling full-time."

"I know. And, stupid as it sounds, I'd rather have the hotel stay."

"That's not stupid. It just betrays a lack of greed."

"Tell that to my banker."

"If he ever came in here for a drink," Larry said, "I would."

"But he won't. We knew before he even hit town that he was an alcoholic."

Larry glanced around the bar, and I wondered what had caught his eye. Apparently, he was merely checking for eavesdroppers, for he leaned a little closer and asked, "Have you told Charlie about us?"

"Yes, of course! He had no problem with me having a new boyfriend. And he's quite happy to go on being my other boyfriend."

"He'd be a fool if he didn't," Larry said. "One more question. Have you told him that you blabbed to me about his sexual orientation?"

I winced mentally, remembering that uncomfortable discussion. "Yes, three or four weeks ago. He was fairly pissed off at me."

"I would have been, too," Larry said. "He's gone to a lot of trouble to hide that particular information."

"Charlie trusted me not to ever tell anyone that he's asexual. And I admitted that I broke that trust. But he's also always known that you and I are close friends and that we never tell anyone else what we know. Two or three times over the couple of years we've been dating, he's questioned me about something I should know, and I've refused to tell him. That helped."

"I take it he forgave you?"

"Yes. We went to a movie last week and he made a point of telling me all was forgiven. He acknowledged the fact that if you'd blabbed, it would have been all over town the next day, and there's never been even a whisper. So now he trusts you, too."

Larry looked pleased. "I'm glad. I like the guy."

"He suggested we should get together here in The Maggie some night and see if that starts any rumors."

"Hang on, Brenda. I need to go do some refills."

Larry went off with his tray and I watched. Only a few people lounged around the bar, but it was a Tuesday night, after all. Most people would have to go to work in the morning. When he went back to his place behind the counter again, he said, "Getting together would be fine. But let's wait until somebody catches on to the fact you're dating two guys, and starts a tale going around. Then the three of us being together would be more effective."

"Okay." I smiled as I imagined the consternation that would cause. Anne-Marie would be speechless. Well, for a minute, anyway. Two guys sharing one girl was way beyond the conventional attitude of most people I knew. Maybe too far beyond.

But I'd cross that bridge when I came to it.

"Larry, did Elizabeth tell you who made the offer on the hotel?"

He shook his head no. "But I know who it is, because he's been in here mouthing off about the changes he'd make if he owned this land."

"Tell me!" I leaned forward.

"Ward and Gwendolyn Best," Larry said in a low voice.

"Oh, my God!"

He blinked at me. "What?"

"They're clients of mine!"

"But Ward said if he built a condominium on this property, he'd take the whole top floor as a penthouse apartment for himself. So why is he looking at other properties?"

"Presumably as a backup if Elizabeth turns down his offer." I chewed up my remaining lemon slice and handed the glass back to Larry for a refill. "I've shown them every waterfront property within their range, and they've rejected them all. However, I did get a new listing this morning that they might like. After they burn the house down."

"I hope they let the fire department do that," Larry said soberly. He handed me a fresh drink and I pushed the money across the bar to him.

"What do you think of them?"

"The Bests? Not much." He pulled a paper bag from under the counter and took out a sandwich.

"Not eating Blueback Grill food tonight?"

"No. I had a big lunch before I came to work." He took a bite, swallowed, and smiled at his sandwich. "Tuna on whole-wheat is delicious. Making sandwiches doesn't count as cooking, but I'm getting good at the meat and two veg thing, too."

"You'll have to do a demo for me one of these days. And I agree about the Bests. If Deception Bay needs new people, it could do better than those two."

Larry nodded. "Yes, and, if he says, one more time, that he's 'Best in the West' I will be tempted to pour his fancy drink over his rug."

"Oh! Does he wear a wig?"

"I thought it was his own hair, dyed, but I got a closer look, and it is definitely a wig."

"Did you find out any of their history?"

"Yeah, some." Larry lifted a hand to signal goodbye to a couple who were leaving. "Ward is a retired dentist. They were both born and raised in Winnipeg."

"If he offered Elizabeth three million, he has to have another source of money. Even dentists don't make that much."

"Wealthy parents," Larry said. "Maybe they brought him up to believe he's something special."

"From my own observations, I'd say he likes being a 'big man' around town. That would be a lot easier in a town this size than in a city. Maybe that's why he chose this place rather than Victoria or Vancouver. You know, a big frog in a small puddle."

"He told me that the golf course between here and Breslow is the best he's seen," Larry said. "I told him about our own Seven Oaks course, and he said he'd have a look. What do you think of Gwendolyn?"

"Ward never gives her a chance to say anything. At least, not while they're looking at property," I said. "I know this is bitchy of me, but she is so thin that, if she wore a green body suit and green tights, she'd look like a grasshopper."

Larry laughed. "Good one, even if it is bitchy." He paused and eyed me. "You don't usually judge people on how they look."

"It's an indication of how much she irritates me, I guess. She smiles all the time, but the smile isn't real. When Ward does let her talk, she acts needy and helpless, as if she has to have a

ton of attention to survive." I sipped my drink and added, "I should be more charitable, I know. But Ward has so many opinions and Gwendolyn has so many twitches that they're not easy to be around."

"I noticed that he kept correcting her, almost every time she spoke," Larry said. "I suppose he thinks he's more intelligent than she is."

"Was he mansplaining?"

"Yeah, that's the word."

"Oh! I just remembered. I do have gossip. When I went to the office this morning, Anne-Marie told me that Dane is missing."

"Dane? Missing? That's hard to believe. How could anyone go missing in a place this size?"

"I know. That's what I've been thinking, too. But he didn't turn up for an appointment at the office and hasn't answered his home phone. If he has one. Anyway, he wasn't answering his cell."

Larry shrugged. "Oh, he'll turn up. Have you ever known Dane not to be where the action is? I'm surprised he hasn't tried to lure the Bests away from you."

"I've been working really hard at avoiding him." I finished my drink. "I'd better head home. I'm showing my new listing to the Bests tomorrow at nine and I do need sleep."

"By the way, I was wondering, do you snore?"

"You didn't hang around long enough to find out."

Larry twinkled at me. "I'd like to remedy that. My next day off is Friday. Are you doing anything?"

I twinkled back. "Of course. I'll demonstrate how quiet I am when asleep. Will you be taking notes?"

"I trust I'll be too tired to stay awake."

"I'll make sure of it," I promised.

Chapter 4 Larry under fire

I woke up mid-morning with a start, desperately looking for a key to open the door that had just slammed behind me. It took a minute or two to bring my mind out of the dark, intense nightmare world into the reality of morning and my messy bed, to remember it was Friday, my day off, and that I'd be seeing Brenda tonight. I felt relieved to be living in the real world again but a glance out the bedroom window told me it was raining, which meant I'd be doing something indoors. I've never been able to believe that walking in the rain is romantic.

After soft-boiled eggs and toast, I grabbed a jacket and umbrella and headed for The Wayfarer to catch up on the bookkeeping. The rain was a gentle patter and I wished it would get fierce and pour down for a week. The fire hazard was damn near off the chart. But, knowing I had about as much influence on the weather as a flea has on an elephant, I turned my thoughts back to the hotel. I could do some poking around today and find out if there were other ways that Elizabeth could save money or time or both. It might help her decide not to sell the hotel.

I went in through the street door, so I could say hello to Sam. "Any problems?" I asked.

He flicked an invisible speck of dust off the lapel of his navy jacket. "A small one. Which you might take care of for me, since I can't leave the desk right now. Several guests will be checking out and some new ones coming in."

"Name it."

"Go up to Room 304 and turn the water off in the bathroom. When they checked out, the guests reported a leak under the hand basin."

"Do I need to call a plumber?"

Sam shook his head. "I've already done that."

"Who do we use?" It occurred to me that there were a lot of things Elizabeth hadn't told me. But she'd left in a hurry, after all.

"Ken Kendall from Breslow. He'll get here sometime today, he says."

I took the stairs for the sake of the exercise, though one flight wasn't really worth bothering with, and was on my knees turning off the water tap under the sink when Peggy, one of the maids, came in with a trolley of cleaning supplies and linen.

"You're not turning the water off, are you?" she said. "I need that so I can clean the sink."

"It's leaking," I said. "The plumber will be here later to fix it. You'll probably need to come back and clean it after he leaves anyway."

Peggy did not look happy. "I hate doing things twice. And I might not have time to come back later. I don't do overtime, you know."

"Then don't clean the room now. Tomorrow will be fine. Sam won't rent it for tonight."

Scowling, Peggy said, "Oh, I'll do the bed then, and leave just the bathroom for tomorrow. But I hate leaving things undone."

I resisted the temptation to ask what else she hated and went back downstairs. Did Elizabeth have many prima donnas on the staff? That question reminded me of my cousin, Susan, and I thought she'd be a worse prima donna as a hotel maid than Peggy could ever be. Susan had married Buck straight out of high school, so she'd never had the broadening experience of working for a living. She was probably the only woman I knew who didn't want to work and be independent. Mom often said, with a sneer, that Susan liked being looked after. Nice work, that, if you can get it.

The next couple of hours I spent in Elizabeth's office, getting the books up to date, preparing a bank deposit, and looking in the filing cabinets to see what kind of files she had. I didn't get as far as looking inside the files, but the number of them and the labels told me that there were far more details involved in running a hotel than I'd realized.

At one, Sam rapped at the door and stuck his head in. "I'm taking my lunch break now. Can you cover the front desk for an hour?"

"Sure! Is there anything I need to know?"

He pointed at the key rack behind the desk. "We have three couples staying for the week. Two have gone out, so their keys are hanging up here. The third couple hasn't shown yet. Room 102."

They were on the bottom floor then, and might have gone for a walk on the beach in the rain, if they were inclined to that sort of romance. I hoped they wouldn't drip too much rainwater on the carpet. That thought surprised me and I couldn't help smiling at my new-found proprietary interest in the carpets.

I locked the office and took my place behind the front desk. Sam donned his navy trench coat, went outside, unfurled a navy and red umbrella, and headed toward Georgia View Mall. Why wasn't he eating at the Blueback Grill, an easy stroll across the lobby? I'd ask him when he came back. If anything was wrong with the food or service, that was something Elizabeth needed to know.

Fifteen minutes went by peacefully, while I poked around in Sam's cubbyhole office, learning how things were organized. Then someone hit the counter bell and I quickly stepped out, smiling in my best 'I-love-people' fashion.

The couple standing on the other side of the counter were frowning, not smiling. Middle-aged, well-groomed, wearing expensive clothing, they looked like the kind of people who would come into the bar, sip dry martinis for a couple of hours, and leave fifty cents as a tip. I hung onto my smile. "Can I help you?"

"We're in room 102," the man said. "There's a draft coming in around the window and we were really cold last night."

With two extra blankets on the top shelf of the closet? "I'm so sorry to hear that, sir. Would you care to change rooms? Or I can have an electric heater placed in your present room."

The man looked at his wife and, apparently, some silent communication occurred. "We'd like the electric heater."

"I'll see to it right away."

"Maybe you could arrange for the sun to shine, too," said the woman, who was still frowning. "We were given to understand that September here would be warm and pleasant."

"It would be nice to control the weather," I said. "I don't like this rain either. But the area is nicknamed 'The Wet Coast' for a reason. Perhaps you'll be lucky, and it'll clear up this afternoon."

But she still wasn't smiling. Neither was he. Then he gamely took up the battle again. "There were no fresh towels left in our room yesterday."

That surprised me. Had Peggy or the other maid been in a snit? Not likely, though. Elizabeth didn't put up with sloppiness. "I do apologize," I said. "I'll send one of the maids down immediately."

"See that you do," the woman said. She turned to look at the Blueback Grill, then back to me. "Does that place serve decent food?"

"I've never had any problem with it. And I've never heard anyone complain." Which was a lie, but I'd learned from my years in the bar that some people aren't happy unless they can bitch about something even if they have nothing to bitch about.

The couple turned and headed toward the Blueback Grill. Before they'd taken more than half a dozen steps, I heard the woman say, "That young man looks too green to manage a lemonade stand, never mind a hotel!" Her husband, if he was her husband, muttered something in response. Fortunately, I couldn't distinguish his words.

When Sam came back, I gave him a report on the unhappy guests.

He hung up his trench coat, shrugged, and said, "We sometimes get people like that. I'll lay you ten to one that yesterday's clean towels are hidden in their suitcases."

"Really? Why would well-off people steal towels?"

"For the thrill," Sam said. "They enjoy getting away with something and, because towels are relatively cheap, they feel no guilt."

"And there's nothing we can do about it?"

"Of course not. You just have to write it off to human nature."

Elizabeth was lucky to have an experienced man on the front desk. I'd have said something to that effect, to give Sam a compliment but, before I could speak, Nick Demaratus strode in through the front door, a few raindrops purling in his black hair.

"Larry," he said, "I need to talk to you."

I took him into Elizabeth's office and shut the door, sure that he wanted to ask me about Dane Soper. As the sergeant in charge of the local detachment of Royal Canadian Mounted Police, he'd be investigating Dane's disappearance. In the bar, for the past two or three days, you'd have thought there was no other subject worth talking about. Every customer had a different idea about where Dane was and what he might be doing.

Demaratus looked around and I could tell he was surprised.

"This is Elizabeth's office," he said. "How come she's not here?"

"She went away for a month's vacation."

He raised his eyebrows. "And left you in charge?"

"Along with George and Sam. I was in here doing the books."

Demaratus nodded, leaned forward in his chair, and rested his forearms on the desk. "I guess you know why I'm here. Dane Soper is still missing."

A lot of people hate cops, but Demaratus was one of the good guys. He came in the bar now and again when he was off duty, and sometimes he'd join in a poker game. I had no problem with telling him what I knew, which wasn't much.

"When did you last see Dane?" Demaratus asked.

"About a week ago," I said. "I'm not sure whether it was Friday or Saturday. Dane is in here almost every day after work so it's hard to pin a date on it. He's like part of the scenery."

"Were you working Monday night?"

"Yes."

"Did he come in then?"

I concentrated, trying hard to remember Monday. Of course! That was the day Elizabeth had told me she was thinking of selling the hotel. A lousy start to my shift. "No, he wasn't in here then. It was very quiet, but it usually is on Mondays."

"You were on the late shift?"

I nodded. "George was on during the day. He's on right now, as a matter of fact."

Demaratus didn't move. "Is Dane a friend of yours?"

"I've played a lot of poker with him, but I wouldn't call him a friend."

"Any particular reason?"

I couldn't tell him about the gang rape. "It's just his personality. He thinks he's smarter than anybody else. And acts like he's entitled to preferential treatment. Oh, yeah, and he's cheap, too."

Demaratus nodded. I couldn't tell if he was agreeing with me or acknowledging what I'd said.

"Any idea why he'd take off without letting anybody know?"

From that question, I could assume that he'd been in touch with Trisha and that she didn't know where Dane was either. "Not a clue. He likes money, so he's always trying to sell something, even in here."

"Any rumors of him having a girlfriend on the side?"

"Not that I've heard, and I usually hear any rumors going around."

"That's what I thought." Demaratus rose. "Okay, thanks. I'll have a word with George."



I browsed through the hotel's financial statements and kicked the numbers around for a while. The place consistently made a profit; not a large one, but enough for Elizabeth to hire an assistant. At five, I put the statements back where I'd found them, locked the door, and went into The Maggie. George was putting on his jacket and Kelly was checking stock. A tall redhead with a sharp wit and a hearty laugh, she filled in for George and me when we had days off.

"Did Demaratus say anything about Dane and what they've found out?" I asked.

George shook his head. "You know cops don't give anything away when they're in the middle of a case."

"Yeah, but there's always hope."

"Hope for what?" Kelly asked.

"A little gossip, of course," I said.

"Go home, you two," she said, with a smile. "If I hear anything juicy tonight, I'll make a note of it. Promise!"

Out on the sidewalk, George and I went our separate ways. The rain had quit, and now the sun was shining. I strolled home, had a shower and a shave, and headed out again. Brenda lived about ten blocks away, an easy walk. I didn't want to take my old gray Ford sedan, because I'd owned it for so long everybody knew who it belonged to. It was only a matter of time before those same people figured out that I was dating Brenda, but for her sake, I'd put it off as long as I could.

When she shut the front door behind me and walked into my arms, I held her for a long time, resting my chin on her blonde hair. She felt wonderful. So did I.

She put her hands on my chest and smiled up at me. "What do you want to do first?"

I let her go. "Oh, a drink would be a fine thing." I kissed her lightly on the lips. "And then supper. I'm happy to wait for dessert until later. Anticipation is half the fun, you know."

"I know. A beer?"

"Perfect." I followed her into the kitchen and made a gin and tonic for her while she opened a Heineken for me. "How did you know I like Heineken?"

"When you have a drink in the bar, that's what you pick."

I should have guessed she'd notice something like that. After all, noticing things about people is what we both enjoyed doing. We took our drinks into the living room and sat kitty-

corner to each other in two big chairs. The view of Deception Bay and the Coast Mountains glinting under the sunshine looked great but not nearly as great as Brenda.

"What's been happening?" I asked. We hadn't seen each other since Tuesday night in The Maggie, when I'd moaned to her about meeting Ward and Gwendolyn Best, the would-be developers.

"I'll tell you all the boring stuff first and get it out of the way," Brenda said, tucking her legs under her in the big chair. "I had my first bridge lesson Wednesday night and stayed afterward to talk to Wilfred Lansdowne."

I knew she sometimes played darts with Wilfred. I'd met him only a few times, since he rarely came into The Maggie. "Had he heard anything about Dane Soper?"

Brenda shook her head no. "His life revolves around Franny and their two cats. And his high school students, of course. Sometimes I'm sure he doesn't even know what goes on in the village, never mind the rest of the world."

"Do you think you're going to like bridge?"

"I can't tell yet," Brenda said. "We only did kindergarten stuff on Wednesday. Like how many cards in a deck and how they're dealt, and how many points the face cards are worth. Then we did some practice hands so as to learn dealing and the protocols involved with that, and also the point counting."

"A lot different to crib then. One of these days I'll teach you how to play poker."

"I'll bet you can teach me all kinds of things."

We sat there grinning foolishly at each other for a minute, anticipating dessert. "Tell me about interesting stuff," I said.

"Yesterday morning was almost too interesting," she said. "Nick Demaratus came into the office first thing and quizzed us all. That was the first time we got the official news that Dane is missing."

"What did he want to know?"

Brenda brushed her shining blonde hair back over her shoulders and moaned. "Everything. But there wasn't much we could tell him, except that Trisha walked out on him a couple of weeks ago and that he was frantic about her taking their son. Nick had one of his constables go in and search Dane's office, but all they got was his card file on all his clients. They took that away, so somebody in the cop shop is probably going to make lots and lots of phone calls."

"So Paul didn't know any more than you do?" Paul Paradise was Brenda's boss.

"No. Nick had the idea that Dane might have gone off with a client to investigate some hot deal, but Paul said he knew nothing about any deals Dane had going. And Ross said the same."

"If Dane had any interesting leads, I doubt he'd tell anybody. He's never been willing to share commissions if there was a way he could avoid it."

Brenda rose. "Let's go into the kitchen, so I can start the steaks and toss the salad while we talk."

"Good. I'm hungry." I'd suggested taking her out for dinner at Maxima's, but we'd decided against it. Going there would start the gossip every bit as fast as me parking my old car outside her house all night.

While she was standing at the counter, fooling with the salad, Brenda said, "Anne-Marie caused me a little trouble. I'd made an offhand remark about Dane maybe shacking up with somebody and, being Anne-Marie, she had to report my bitchy remark to Nick."

"Typical." Nobody who'd known Anne-Marie for more than a day ever told her a secret. I wondered what her husband was like. So far as I knew, he'd never been in The Maggie. And I'd never heard anyone say anything about him.

"Yeah." Brenda flipped the sizzling steaks. "I finally convinced Nick that I'd only said it because I don't like Dane. And, of course, Nick had to go digging for my reasons." She put the salad on the table. "I told him it's because Dane doesn't care about anybody but himself. Well, except for his wife and son. He finally seemed to accept that I'm not carrying on a vendetta against the man. Though I'd certainly like to."

The steaks came off the grill onto our plates and we took a few minutes away from gossip to appreciate the food. And I did; the salad was crisp and the steak rare, the way I like it.

"You didn't come in for a drink last night," I said.

"I meant to," Brenda said, "but I had a karate class at the dojo in Breslow and while I was working out, I got so worried that Gina might have something to do with Dane's disappearance that I decided it would be safer to go home. I was scared I'd blurt out something to you that somebody might overhear."

"And put two and two together to make fourteen, as people around here often do."

She nodded. "I'm very worried about Gina. She's the only person I know with a motive to kill that bastard and, if he does turn up dead, I'm scared one of his buddies will tell the cops about the rape."

We ate in silence for a while. I didn't know Gina well enough to guess whether or not she was capable of killing anyone. However, if the cops found out she had been the victim of a gang-rape, with Dane being one of the guys involved, they'd really go after her. But perhaps I could make Brenda a little less worried.

"I don't think that'll be a problem. The other four guys have left town," I said. "Hollis Kirby went back to Calgary, and Josh Allen moved to Victoria. Apparently, Hank is still in Victoria, too. And Ray Kallinsky is in jail and not likely to get out for a few years."

Brenda sighed. "Yeah, I know. But that won't stop any of them from talking if they find out Dane is missing."

"Have you talked to Gina this week?"

"Tuesday night we were both at the Amazon Club meeting." Brenda frowned, obviously trying to remember pertinent details. "Gina was acting quite normal. In fact, I was pleased for her, because she joined in the discussion naturally and seems to have conquered the shyness that she felt the first couple of times she came. But I haven't had any private talk with her."

I pushed my chair back. "Maybe we're borrowing trouble. After all, you might be right about Dane being shackled up somewhere. He could walk into the office tomorrow, wondering what all the fuss is about." I didn't actually believe that, but I also didn't want to worry for nothing.

Brenda's jaw muscles relaxed. "Ready for dessert?"

I moved around to her end of the table and ran my hand up her bare arm. "Dessert comes later, remember? What about a brandy? I'll do it; I pour a mean brandy."

She laughed. "Sounds good."

Brenda cleared the table while I warmed the brandy in her microwave. In a few minutes, we were back in the living room, this time sitting side by side on the couch where we could watch the sun go down and the twilight fade over the ocean.

On my second sip of brandy, I remembered Brenda's new listing. "Did you show that waterfront property to Wade and Gwendolyn?"

She did her little pretend growl, deep in her throat. "Of course. And it went exactly the way I was afraid it might. They liked the view, hated the house."

"That figures."

"I'm afraid so," she said. "But then I decided to try something else. So I told Ward that I'd heard he was going to make an offer on the Wayfarer, and that I thought I'd be his best bet as the listing agent for the condos he wants to build."

"And?"

She growled again. "He wants a man for that job. He actually had the nerve to say that women are too soft in business. And too dumb."

"Wow! I know Ward is crass, but I didn't think he was that bad."

"He and Dane would make a perfect pair."

"And rip off everybody." Brenda took a deep breath. "Well, so far as I know, they haven't met and maybe they won't. Ward did say he'd list with a Vancouver broker because that's where the money is."

I rolled another sip of brandy around on my tongue. "I wonder if he's realized that a realty firm can pay for ads anywhere in the world."

"I don't think he's realized much of anything except that he's wonderful."

That made me laugh. "And Anne-Marie thinks your statement about Dane was bitchy!"

Brenda grinned. "When it comes to Wade, I've barely begun."

I slid my arm around her shoulders, and she snuggled closer. "Ward told me he plans on making these condos the ultimate in luxury. You know the kind of thing: twelve-foot ceilings, heated bathroom floors, motorized roller-shade blinds, a concierge offering a full range of services, secured underground parking with cameras, and a car-wash station."

"That would seem to be over the top in a small place like Deception Bay," Brenda said.

"Oh, yes, and the units will also be wired for smart-home automation and there'll be an upscale restaurant and bar on the main floor."

"I thought the big draw was the view of Deception Bay and the Strait."

"That's the icing on the cake, I guess. Ward said he figures the sale price should be around a million each. Maybe more."

Brenda sat up straighter and turned to look at me. "How many condos is he planning to put in this building?"

"About sixty. Six floors, with the ultimate luxurious penthouse suite for him and Gwendolyn."

"He'd better have a talk with the village council and the regional district board. They might not allow six floors because that would wreck the view residents already have." Brenda leaned forward and began to tick things off on her fingers. "He'd have to get an engineering firm's take on the foundations because he'd be building on sand, and these days you also have to build to withstand earthquakes. Then there's the water supply."

Deception Bay took its water from Parsons River, which flows through town, and pumped it into a tower, so as to get adequate pressure. "We might have to build a second tower or install a totally different system. I don't think Ward should count his condos before he jumps through all the hoops bureaucracy can throw in his way."

Brenda snuggled back into my arm. "And you'd better not count on getting to run his fancy new bar."

I laughed. "I'd never rely on his word for anything. Ward maybe has a good idea on how to make money, but this idea could easily fizzle out. Anyway, I'd rather work for Elizabeth, so I'm determined to talk her out of selling."

"I'll sure back you up," Brenda said. "I don't want Deception Bay to be a playground for the rich. I want it to stay the same old scruffy village it's always been, where everybody talks about everybody else."

"I doubt that would change."

"There'd be more people to talk about," she mused. She held up her glass. "Could you do that brandy thing again?"

"Of course." I put the glasses on the coffee table and pulled Brenda to her feet. Holding her tight against me, I kissed her lips, then slid my lips around to her ear, then down her throat. "And after that, dessert, okay?"

"Okay." She sounded a little breathless.

Chapter 5 Brenda outed

The phone on my desk rang and I picked it up at once. The caller might be the client I'd been driving around to look at houses all weekend. If she'd decided to buy one of them, it would make up for wrecking my social life. It had been the long Thanksgiving weekend and I'd had to postpone dinner with Charlie and cancel a hot date with Larry.

But it was Gina Benedetti. "Can you pick me up for the meeting tonight?"

I glanced at my calendar. Of course, it was Tuesday, not Monday. Long weekends always throw me off. And the Amazons were meeting tonight. It seemed impossible that two weeks had passed since the last one.

"Sure, no problem," I said.

"Thanks, Brenda!" Gina sounded relieved. "I never like to ask, but my father went deer hunting with one of the Zacharias men this morning, and they took our van in case they decided to stay overnight. If they come back before seven, I'll phone."

"Don't bother," I said. "I'll come early, so I can say hello to your mother. I haven't seen her in ages."

Accordingly, I arrived at the Benedetti house at six-thirty. Gina let me in and then rushed off to change, so I wandered into the kitchen, the room from which Luisa had been ruling her kingdom for some forty years.

"Oh, Brenda!" she exclaimed, reaching up from her wheelchair for the usual big hug. "You're looking good! Looking happy. Maybe you find husband, yes?"

"No. But I'm enjoying life. How about you?"

She ignored my question and shook her head. "Life always better when woman has husband. I keep telling Gina that, but she do nothing. Just go to work and study. Study! She should be study babies."

I'd heard that song before, many times. I wondered how Gina managed to live with it, day in and day out. "Maybe she'll meet somebody at the library," I said and added, hoping to divert Luisa, "How're all your family? And you?"

She waved her hand dismissively. "Me? I'm always good. Betty look after me while Gina works, and Carlo is around most times. The boys are doing wonderful. My grandchildren, they all get big, big, big. And cheeky. When they come close enough, I spank!"

"Will you be okay on your own here this evening? Gina said Carlo went hunting this morning."

"Yes, he go with Bert Zacharias. They might be back later. But will eat well. Gina made them big, big food last night, so they won't go hungry." She paused and nodded. "Campfires not allowed now, so no hot food."

"Yes, I know. The forests are too dry, and we need rain very badly."

"Rain will come," Luisa said. "Tell me what news you know. I heard Mrs. Plecas have cancer."

I told her what I'd heard about Mrs. Plecas and we gossiped for fifteen minutes until Gina came to get me.

Luisa hugged us both. "You girls have a good time. Enjoy the movie."

In the car, I said, "What movie are we seeing?"

Gina smiled. "That doesn't matter. She'll never ask what it was."

"Okay." But I made a mental note to find out what was on at the local theater, just in case.
"Do you think she'd be unhappy about you belonging to the Amazon Club?"

"She'd hate it! You know what my folks are like."

"Ultra-traditional."

"Right! Women should get married and have babies. Men rule their families. Mom thinks independent women are going against nature."

"Ah, well, as long as you can deal with it."

"Oh, I can deal with it," Gina said, her tone suddenly serious, bordering on harsh. "Nobody will ever push me around again."

The thought came at once, but I couldn't voice it. Had Gina been involved in Dane's disappearance?



Once we were settled, with candles flickering and our wine glasses full, we picked up where we'd left off at the last meeting, with mansplaining.

Toby began by suggesting that women could be every bit as guilty of mansplaining as any man. "I had a friend in college who did it," she said. "Connie was quite sure that she knew more than any of us about any subject you could name. It never mattered what I said, she always had more information about it than I did."

"My parents are like that about marriage," Gina said. "They believe the only proper place for a woman in life is as a wife and mother. I could be an expert in, oh, say physics, and that wouldn't impress them, even though they know literally nothing about physics. They're quite convinced, however, that they know how all of us should live our lives."

Toby lifted her hand and touched Gina's shoulder. "Does it bother you?"

"No," Gina said. "They're entitled to think what they like. But so am I."

"Good for you," Toby said. "Don't ever forget it."

Phyllis leaned forward in her chair. "A long time ago I read an article about something called the 'male answer syndrome,' which sounds very much like mansplaining. The author claimed that it was display behavior, used to impress women, and that a man nearly always offers an answer to any question asked even though he may know nothing about it."

That got a giggle from Kitty, my massage therapist. "I know that one! My brother can't pay his credit card bills, but he knows how to deal with the national debt and what our trade balance with China should be."

"I'll bet he simply wants to be helpful," Phyllis said. "In my opinion, most men want to solve problems and be useful. They want to feel needed and necessary."

"But some want to be dominant," Midge said, "and those are the men who are always out to prove that they know more than anyone else."

I was feeling very lucky that the complaints about men didn't fit either Larry or Charlie. "I have a biologist friend who says there actually isn't any marked difference between male and female brains, so we have no scientific basis for our prejudices about what certain sexes should or shouldn't do. It all stems from how cultures have developed. And, I suppose, who developed them."

Toby nodded. "I think we've covered mansplaining. There are two more books I'd like you to read, but I have something special in mind for the next meeting, on the twenty-third of October. If you can get one of the books read by November sixth, that would be great."

Notebooks and pens came from robe pockets to the table. "Which books?" I asked.

Toby opened her notebook. "The first one is *Women and Power* by Mary Beard. It's a history of how powerful women have been treated under the gender agenda of men. She also gets into the cultural sources of misogyny."

"Okay, got it," said Donna. "What's the other one?"

"*Bitch Doctrine: Essays for Dissenting Adults*. That one is by Laurie Penny. It's a collection of her essays about current social issues. Penny is brash and confrontational, but humorous."

"Good," Midge said. "But listen while Toby tells you about the Tauropolia."

Toby closed her notebook. "It's a ritual celebrated by Greek worshippers of Artemis. History says she was pre-Greek by thousands of years. When the Greeks won the land which they now occupy, they had to fit the local gods into their own Homeric pantheon."

"Just as the later Christians tried to fit pagan deities into Christian form," I said.

"That's right." Toby nodded. "Her past was ancient and savage, but the Greeks idealized her into a gracious maiden, rather than a real huntress."

"She has many aspects," Midge said. "She's young, beautiful, and chaste in her role as a goddess of childbirth, the moon, and chastity. But she's also the mistress of wild beasts and nature, and fiercely destructive to those who arouse her anger. The Amazons adored Artemis as their leader and protector."

"As we do, too," Toby said. "Her main aspect was as a huntress and that meant being a virgin because hunting was associated with purity. The hunter taking life had to make amends for destroying purity, and assuage the gods he made angry by so doing."

"But what about the ritual?" Kitty asked.

"From everything I've read," Toby said, "the Greeks disliked savagery and declared that the ritual was not Greek but arose with the barbarian Tauroi. That's why they called the ritual the Tauropolia. But, because they had to appease the people they'd conquered, they turned a blind eye to the celebration."

Donna said, "Is the ritual so awful then?" From the expressions around the table, she was asking something we were all curious to hear.

"Not when it was performed in Greece," said Toby. "It included a vigil, with the women who worshipped the goddess singing and dancing all night in her honor, but it also contained a trace of human sacrifice." Toby paused. "A man was led to the altar and a slight cut, just enough to drain several drops of blood, was made in his throat. Historians are fairly sure that in past times the knife was driven deeper."

"Wow!" Awe was evident in Phyllis's tone.

Toby went on. "Ancient coins have been found that portray Tauric Artemis holding a shield and upraised ax. She was also portrayed with a bull's head at her feet, and carrying a torch."

"So," I said, "obviously some of the rituals in her honor included sacrifices."

"That kind of thing was common in ancient times," Toby said. "There were elaborate rituals to appease a killed animal and any god associated with it. All Greek armies performed sacrifices before going to war, often to Artemis. They would split the sacrificed animal in half and the army would march between the halves, so it was also a sort of hunting ritual. After marching, they'd eat the animal."

"A group thing," Donna muttered.

"Of course," Toby said. "That's the main point of performing a ritual. It confirms the unity and identity of the group. Members derive comfort from belonging. I suppose that's why some really archaic rituals have been preserved for so long."

"It's fascinating," Kitty said, glancing over at the altar. "I've learned a lot about Artemis since joining the club, but I never knew men were sacrificed in her honor." She turned her gaze back to Toby. "Why do you want us to celebrate the Tauropolia?"

"I thought it was time to explore the savage aspects of Artemis," Toby replied. "We've talked about her as a goddess of hunting, animals, and trees, and worshipped her as a leader and protector. But, like humans, she has a dark side. I think it would be educational to recognize that dark side and therefore our own dark sides as well."

I glanced over at Gina, across the table from me, her black hair gleaming softly in the candlelight. If she'd had anything to do with Dane's disappearance, she'd be well aware of her dark side. But I couldn't believe that she knew anything about it. She looked serene and relaxed, and her eyes were alight with interest. Surely she couldn't appear so comfortable if she knew what had happened to him.

"If you're all agreed," Toby said, "we'll do the ritual two weeks from now."

"At my farm, if the weather holds," Midge said. "It would be good to hold it outside, the way the Greeks did, and the Amazons, but not if it's pouring rain. We'll let you know."



The next night, Charlie picked me up at five-thirty for our dinner date at Maxima. "Why so early?" he asked, after climbing into the driver's side.

"It's Wednesday. I have a bridge class at eight."

"Oh, I should have remembered that. One of these days you'll be expert enough to trump all my aces."

"Not if we're partners."

He leaned over and kissed my cheek. "We'll always be partners. I hope."

"Me, too."

Cameron Steele, the owner of Maxima, greeted us at the door, as he occasionally did, and I waited while he and Charlie did the human male equivalent to cats purring and butting heads to show friendship. When they had finished expressing their deep appreciation of each other, Cameron showed us to a table by a window overlooking the bay.

Several people I knew were dining in the restaurant, including my boss, Paul Paradise. That reminded me of Dane Soper and the unanswered questions about where he was and what had happened to him. If anything had happened. I was still inclined to believe that he'd found an irresistible female and gone off with her.

I didn't want to think about Dane, nor did I dare talk about his disappearance, in case my tongue slipped and revealed my concern over whether Gina was involved. Charlie was altogether too good at reading my tones and facial expressions.

Instead, I told him everything I knew about Ward and Gwendolyn Best, and how they wanted to buy The Wayfarer Inn and then tear it down so they could build a condominium.

"I assume they have lots of money," Charlie said, looking affectionately at his glass of red wine.

"Tons. Well, so they say."

Charlie looked searchingly at me. "And how do you feel about losing The Wayfarer to progress?"

"Progress! That's not progress, that's just greed."

"Not everybody would agree with you. And wouldn't you stand to make some good commissions selling condo units?"

Charlie's looks were so appealing that sometimes I forgot he had a brain to match. "I might do all right. And, if the deal goes through, I'll sell as many as I can. But I'd rather the hotel stayed. It's a neat piece of history. I like looking at it, and I like spending time in it."

The waiter arrived with our plates of sizzling garlic prawns and, for a few minutes, we were too busy enjoying the food to bother with words.

Charlie put his fork down and looked at me. "I will concede that what is called 'progress' isn't always good. But refusing to change can be bad, too. Would losing the hotel really make that much difference in your life?"

"Yes. Where would Larry and I indulge in our gossip sessions?"

He grinned. "Ah, I'd momentarily forgotten about those. Okay, I see your point. But I don't know what you can do about it. Unless the locals get together and outbid the Bests."

"Or Larry can talk Elizabeth out of selling."

"I'm no good at foretelling the future," Charlie said. "But your mention of history reminds me of a question I want to ask you."

I was relieved to have the subject changed. Worrying about losing The Wayfarer to so-called progress wouldn't accomplish anything. "Do tell. Or ask, rather."

"I have a new client, a very old lady called Charlotte Tweedsmuir. Does that name mean anything to you?"

For a second, nothing clicked. Then memories began surfacing above my current concerns. "The Tweedsmuirs were one of the first families to settle here. They had a big house and a big family out on Tweedsmuir Point, where Sunset Manor is now."

"Anything else?" Charlie laid his knife and fork on the side of his empty plate, put his elbows on the table, and rested his chin on his hands. The gesture was familiar. He was preparing to rake through my memory for everything he could get.

"No, I don't think so. The family was apparently a force to be reckoned with, but I don't know whether it was because they had money or because they had lots to do with developing the village."

Charlie smiled. "Believe me, Charlotte still is a force to be reckoned with, in spite of being ninety and frail. It has occurred to her, finally, that one of these days she's going to die, and she wants to make sure that her wealth goes where it should."

"To her family, surely?"

"Not necessarily. Not to all of them, anyway. There are stories about one or two offspring. She wants to know if the stories are true. So, I'm having to research the family history." He sighed. "In detail."

"You could give the local library a try," I said, giving the dessert menu only a cursory glance. I already knew what I wanted to order. Cameron Steele's chocolate pie with raspberry coulis. I was convinced that the phrase 'to die for' had been specially created to describe it.

"Local library? Why?"

"One thing I do remember is that a woman who lived all her life here wrote a history of Deception Bay for our bicentennial, which was roughly ten years ago. I had a copy, but it's disappeared, so the library is your best bet. They should have several copies on hand."

"And who would I talk to there?"

"Two women work in the library, and I think you met both of them at Larry's beer bash last summer. Donna Zacharias and Gina Benedetti."

Charlie nodded. "I'm not sure I remember Donna, but Gina had the kind of looks that are unforgettable. Dark, passionate, full of fire."

I raised my eyebrows. "I thought you were immune to good looks in either sex."

His eyes twinkled. "I've always cultivated a great appreciation for beauty, wherever I find it. Even if I don't want to take it to bed."

"Then talk to Gina, so you can make your eyes happy. The library is in the Georgia View Mall." Gina would probably enjoy Charlie's looks, too, even if the rape had put her off men for good. Charlie was drop-dead gorgeous, knew it, and enjoyed displaying it.

Dessert and coffee arrived, and I managed to eat my chocolate pie without moaning in ecstasy.

"I do have a tiny bit of gossip for you," Charlie said. "Not at all exciting, but you might find it interesting. I mentioned him once before and you reacted. It's about a guy called Ray Kallinsky, who is a resident in Breslow's jail, awaiting trial."

"I'm always interested in what the locals are up to, even when they're not locals anymore." And, though I couldn't tell Charlie why without breaking my promise of silence to Gina, I was especially interested in bad things happening to her attackers.

"He was charged with drug dealing," Charlie said, "and obviously he's still operating. He got beaten up so badly that he's in hospital and my buddy, the prosecutor, says the word is that he was dealing in prison and cheated one of the other prisoners."

"Couldn't happen to a nicer guy."

"I take it he's not one of your favorite people."

"No, never has been. He's a creep." I knew by the look on Charlie's face that he wanted to hear the dirty details of why Ray was a creep, but I couldn't tell him. I'd tell Gina, though. It might make her happy to know Ray had brought more grief on himself. "Speaking of drugs, Charlie, is it true that pot will soon be legal?"

Charlie raised his eyebrows. "Yes, it will. Don't you listen to the news?"

"Sometimes. But lots of times I forget."

"Cannabis will be legal for recreational purposes on October seventeenth. A week from today."

"Thanks. I guess I'll have to try it."

Charlie covered my hand with his. "I'll get you some and we'll get stoned together."

"Promise?"



Charlie promised to introduce me to the wonders of marijuana and dropped me off at the high school so that I could continue my education in the art of playing bridge. I was happy to listen to Wilf droning on about the joys of the game and give my mind a rest from its usual musings about what was happening in my world. Even as a child, I'd been intensely interested in finding out what happened next, whether it was fiction or reality.

After the bridge class, I walked home, got the car out, and drove down the hill to The Wayfarer, half my brain scolding me for being too lazy to walk and the other half insisting I had the right to do as I damn well pleased.

Larry's smile banished the argument, and I settled on the bar stool to indulge in my favorite recreational sport. "What news?" I asked, after he handed me a gin and tonic with two lemon wedges. "Wedges instead of wheels?"

"I thought you might like a change. Tell me if you prefer to go back to slices," he said. "And no, I haven't heard a thing. Not even the faintest whisper."

This did not surprise me, since we'd seen each other on Saturday night, only four days previously. But it was disappointing not to have any further clues about what was happening next. "I have a little news, but it's about anticipation, not actual events. Charlie said he'd show me how to smoke pot as soon as it's legal next week."

Larry grinned. "Then maybe you can teach me. I tried it a couple of times when I was in school, but beer is still my drug of choice. Is that all?"

"No, the Amazons are going to try something new, too." I told him what I'd learned about the Tauropolia, interrupted, as usual, by his going off to look after the customers and pouring fresh drinks.

"That's weird," he said. "It's fine to recognize your dark side and learn how to control it, but I don't see any point in re-enacting some ancient ritual."

"Maybe Toby just likes to get all dressed up in her Amazon costume." Then I shook my head. "No, that's not fair. She seems fascinated by ancient history, and she certainly has a passion for Amazons."

"If they ever existed."

"Doesn't matter whether they did or not. It's the idea of them that excites her. Like a little kid imagining he's Superman or Spiderman."

"Whose throat is she planning to cut?" Larry asked.

That question made me shiver, in spite of the fact I'd asked myself the same thing. "I have no idea. Except that it won't be a living man."

"If the ritual is going to be at Midge's farm, maybe it'll be one of her goats."

"Ugh, that's a horrible thought! Anyway, I'm sure it'll be a fake sacrifice, whoever or whatever she uses. She enjoys pretending to be an Amazon but, basically, she's a civilized human being."

We went on talking, while the bar gradually cleared. Finally, I was the only customer left. But it was also after midnight and I had to go to work the next day, so I slid off the bar stool and put my jacket on.

Larry came out from behind the bar to help with the jacket. "Are you going to cook dinner Friday night? Or is it my turn?"

"I'll do it. You made dinner last time."

He put his arms around me, and we indulged in a long, lovely goodnight kiss. We pulled apart and I turned to head for the entrance.

And stopped dead in my tracks. Standing in the entrance and staring at us with her mouth wide open was Carol Jenkins, one of the waitresses from the Blueback Grill.

Chapter 6 Larry fights fire

I lay awake for a long time, annoyed with myself for carelessly getting Brenda into trouble. Carol Jenkins would waste no time spreading the news that she'd seen Brenda and me kissing. I'd put my heart into that kiss, so there was no hope that she could have interpreted it as anything but romantic, either.

Carol had scooted back into the restaurant, and I apologized to Brenda. She wasn't angry, merely resigned. "It had to happen sooner or later. I'll just have to deal with the snarky comments when they happen. And I'll let Charlie know we've been outed because I can guarantee he'll hear about that kiss before tomorrow is over."

So, what with feeling guilty and imagining the stupid remarks I'd have to deal with myself, I didn't get to sleep until four a.m. So it was noon before my eyes opened.

As soon as my brain shifted from neutral to low gear, I knew something was wrong. I could smell smoke.

I struggled out of the tangled sheets and blankets and hurried to my living room balcony. But what I could see of the village was calm. The Wayfarer was covered in ivy leaves red enough to look like flames, but no smoke issued from the windows. I went to look out the kitchen window and stood there, gripping the sill, stunned.

It looked like all of Mount Arrowsmith was burning. Smoke boiled up into a blue sky and I could see the flicker of tall flames, even from something like two miles away. A water bomber dropped its load into the fire and flew away for more. Another bomber appeared from the west and did the same. When I glanced down at the parking lot, I noticed the slender trees along the edge were bending in the wind.

The wind blowing. No rain. The odds were strong for the fire to be devastating.

I phoned the fire hall and the chief himself answered. In answer to my question, he said, "Stay out of it, Larry. You have no experience fighting fire, so you'd likely just get in the way. The best thing you can do is have plenty of beer for the crews when they come off shift."

"I'll do that. When did it start?"

"I got the first call about 3:00 a.m.," Graham said. He sounded tired. "A guy driving down from Campbell River noticed the flames. Most of my crew is up on that mountain, so I hope nothing in town decides to burn." The village's firemen were all volunteers, except for the chief.

"Any other firefighters up there?"

"Yeah. Crews came up from Victoria, Duncan, and Breslow. Vancouver promised more water bombers and helicopters. I gotta go, Larry. The other phone's ringing."

As soon as I hung up, I turned on the television to the local station, KPQS. It was owned by one of the big cable companies and the programming consisted mostly of community announcements, with just a couple hours of local programs. At first, all I got was canned music, but then a warning flashed on that nobody should attempt to use Highway 12 to Port Henderson, the other side of Arrowsmith and on the Pacific Ocean side of the island. Then back to the music again. It was probably too soon for any real news.

I had a shower, made breakfast, and thought about the possibilities. If the wind from the south continued, it would keep blowing the fire up the mountain. That was bad enough, but a switch to the north, or the southwest, would put the village in danger, along with all the rural areas north and south of us. The wind was a wild card.

The village being in danger of fire made me think of Elizabeth's house on Tweedsmuir Drive. I'd been there a few times for Christmas parties or summer barbecues, and I loved the place. The sprawling, one-story house had been built in the 1920s, and was set in a grove of Garry oaks, with a terrific view of Georgia Strait from the top of the cliff that marked the waterfront in that area. The house was finished with cedar shakes and fit so perfectly into the landscape, it looked as if it had grown there. What I'd seen of the interior was a large, low-ceilinged living room, comfortable old furniture, and a lot of dog hair. A similar caretakers' cottage stood nearby. The property was well fenced, of course, so her dogs could run free, but it was also heavily treed. If the fire got that far, the whole place would go up in flames.

I hoped that Bernie wouldn't go frantic at the smell of smoke. Normally, he'd do whatever the caretakers, Lucy and Ken, told him to do, but he'd be impossible to get into a car if he panicked.

There were no trees on my mom's small lot, but with a heavy wind blowing, her place was every bit as likely to catch fire.

I phoned the hardware store and Mom answered the phone. "Do you know what you're going to do if the fire gets into the village?"

"Did you just wake up and find out what's going on?" she said. "Yes, I brought the car to work. It's loaded with clothes and baby pictures from when you and Steve were little. If that fire comes down the mountain and heads this way, I'll drive south."

"Okay, good." I might have guessed that she'd be prepared. "What about Susan? Have you talked to her?"

"She'll be safe. Buck is home." She paused. "Well, he's on days off, but he's likely up the mountain, fighting fire. So he's not home, but he'd never let anything happen to Susan. I don't know what his plans are, but he'll have some. And what about you? That apartment of yours is built of wood, in case you never got your nose out of a book long enough to notice."

"I'll figure it out," I said.

"You'd better." She hung up.

If we were lucky, the wind would die down and a heavy rain would start and come down for at least three days. Could we be so lucky? Could we get through this without anybody getting hurt?



Shortly after I went on shift at five, three of the local volunteer firemen came in for the free beer I'd promised. I could smell the smoke on them when they walked in the door. They came and sat on bar stools. One of them was Jerry, from the lumberyard.

He said, "We did only a quick wash, so we'll stay off the soft chairs."

"Thanks," I said. "What's it like up there?"

Jerry's eyes were red-rimmed and one of the other guys was coughing. "It's ugly," Jerry said. "I don't know what else I can say. It's hot and smoky and dirty and the wind never quit until an hour ago."

"Does anybody know how it started?"

"Not as yet," Jerry said. "But the experts are poking around, looking. If it was some guy tossed a cigarette, I'll have his balls for breakfast."

There was a growl of agreement from the other two men. One of them said, "Any guy that fucking stupid is a waste of oxygen. Or gal. Could a been a gal."

The two guys with Jerry downed their brews fast and left, saying they were going to eat and grab some sleep before they went up the mountain again in the morning.

Jerry opted for a second beer. "You still staying away from poker?"

"Hadn't thought much about it the last few days." That was a lie. I missed my poker games, but didn't want to play with Dane and Josh. However, Josh Allen had moved to Victoria after his wife left him and the marina sold. And Dane had disappeared. So, it would be just Jerry and me from the old group and I was sure we could pick up some other players.

Jerry seemed to read my thoughts. "I been asking a few people and Ross Miller from Paradise Realty says he's interested."

"Yeah, he's one of the good guys. I could check with Ferris Denver from the accounting office. Last time he was in for a drink he mentioned something about poker."

"That would be a good start," Jerry said. "And Dane might show up again. You any idea where he is?"

"Hell, no! Not a clue." I'd been asked that question so often, the reply was automatic. But the possibility of Dane showing up was making me drag my feet about the poker. No way I'd play with somebody I detested.

"Listen, Larry, did I tell you about Hank getting wasps mailed to him?"

"No. You're kidding me!"

He shook his head. "Nope. You remember I told you Hank wanted his old job back at the lumberyard. And the boss mouthed off about it in front of a lot of people. So, somebody must have took note of his address and sent the wasps. Live ones. Jesus!"

"How'd you find out?"

"Amos went to Victoria on business and took time to check up on Hank. Guess he felt bad that he wouldn't hire Hank back. Anyway, Hank's in the loony bin again."

It couldn't happen to a nicer guy, I thought. Not an original comment, but it was how I felt about all five of Gina's rapists. I made a mental note to tell Brenda about Hank losing it again. She'd casually pass the news on to Gina, though maybe Gina already knew. She could have mailed those wasps. But she was too savvy to ever admit it. Jerry finished his beer and headed off home.

The Maggie was quiet for the rest of the evening. My usual customers were either fighting the fire, or staying home to watch TV and maybe pack stuff into their cars for a fast getaway. I knew Brenda wouldn't be in because it was one of her nights to go practice karate in Breslow and, usually, all she wanted to do afterward was soak in a bath full of hot water. Anyway, she'd be making her own plans about getting out if the fire looked like it might come this way. She had that old, gray cat to worry about, too. I hoped she was packing.

I decided the lack of customers meant I had time to eat a hot dinner, for a change, so I ordered chicken and fries from the Blueback Grill next door. Mike delivered the tray, glanced around, and said, "Good call!" It was, too. I got to eat every bit of it without an interruption.

At eleven, life perked up again when Sergeant Nick Demaratus came in. He looked tired, and brought with him a sharp whiff of smoke.

I poured him a beer and shook my head when he offered to pay. "You been fire fighting?"

"No, mostly the sightseers. They want to watch what the fire's doing and they get in the way of the people who are trying to put the damn thing out. Half my crew are up there sweating their guts out."

I let him get through half his glass before I asked about Dane. "Any progress on finding out where Dane Soper went? Or have you heard that question too many times?"

Demaratus shrugged. "No oftener than I've asked it myself. People don't usually disappear without a trace, but Soper seems to have managed it. We're beginning to think it might have been murder or suicide. You have any thoughts on that?"

"I don't know why anybody'd want to kill him." I did know, of course, but I wasn't going to put Gina at risk. "As for suicide, maybe his wife leaving was too much for him to take."

"Could be." Demaratus frowned. "But from what I saw of him, and what people have said, I doubt he's the type to let that destroy him. There's always the possibility of accidental death, but outside of vehicle accidents, what could it be? He didn't hunt, didn't fish, didn't do anything, apparently, other than sell houses."

"Maybe he went to inspect a property and fell down a set of stairs or into a well or something."

Demaratus pushed his glass across for a refill. "That doesn't seem likely." He hesitated, then went on. "I guess there's no reason for me to hold back. That receptionist at Paradise Realty will have told everybody in town by now anyway. Dane got a call around noon of Monday the twenty-fourth of September, the day he vanished. He told Anne-Marie the call was important, and she remembers him looking excited. Then he left."

Brenda had told me that. "Did you trace the call?"

"Yeah. The only information the phone company has is a record of numbers called, length of calls, date, and time. So we did get that number. The call he got at the office turned out to be from one of his clients, to do with a new subdivision they were putting together."

"What did the client say?"

"Just what you'd expect. They met, had coffee, then lunch, made some decisions, and Dane left. He told the client he was headed home. Soper must have got home all right, because we found dirty supper dishes and a fresh TV dinner container in the garbage."

"And nothing since," I said. "There sure hasn't been any gossip."

"Well, another phone call was made to his cell late in the afternoon, but from a public phone in Breslow, so the caller could have been anybody. And, wherever it was he went, he took a full bottle of scotch with him," Demaratus said. "On the kitchen counter, we found a receipt for that from a liquor store in Breslow. Dated Monday the twenty-fourth."

In the fireplace, the new logs I'd put on crackled and spit sparks. He glanced around at the sound. "Do you put that fire out before you leave?"

Not surprising he was nervous about fire. So was I. "It will probably burn itself out before I go. If it doesn't, I'll douse it with water, as usual."

Demaratus finished his beer and shook his head when I offered him another. "I've got to get some sleep. Anyway, wherever Dane went, he either walked, or got picked up. His BMW is still in his garage."

"I'd heard that. Could have been a taxi, maybe."

"No, not a taxi. We checked all the cab companies in the area." Demaratus saw me open my mouth and said, "No, not a Uber cab, either. We checked those as well. So, he walked out of his house, carrying a bottle of scotch, and, so far as we can tell, vanished into thin air."

"Did you search the area around his house?"

Demaratus looked disgusted. "Are you kidding? We found nothing. And none of the neighbors saw anything."

I decided to try for a touch of humor to send him on his way. "Maybe he phoned Amazon for a freight drone."

That did bring a quick smile. "That's not as crazy as it sounds." Demaratus eased off his stool and lifted a hand in farewell. "Keep the beer coming for the guys."



Friday morning, I awoke to the patter of rain on the window, but the pervasive stench of smoke was still there. The view from my kitchen window told me the smoke was still rolling off the mountain, but I couldn't see any flames now. I made a cup of coffee and sat down in front of the TV with it.

I lucked in. KPQS was on the job with news about the fire.

"Fire prevention officials have just announced that the devastating fire still burning on Mount Arrowsmith was caused by a lit cigarette, most likely thrown out of the window of a vehicle. It was found on Zillinsky Road, off Highway 12. Zillinsky Road is the only access to the ski lodge on Arrowsmith and it is believed that the cigarette may have been thrown by one of the crew going up to open the lodge for winter skiing season. The investigation is continuing."

Yeah, no kidding. I could imagine a van full of teenagers, singing and smoking, on their way up to the lodge, not paying the least attention to anything around them. Whoever had done it might get a heavy fine, maybe even prison, but I thought the most appropriate punishment would be sending the culprit to fight forest fires. Forever and ever. Well, at least for life.

The newscaster went on. "The fire has eaten its way through four hundred acres of prime second-growth, but the rain that began around two this morning is helping firefighters. The weather forecast predicts rain for the next three or four days. However, the crews will continue to work on keeping the fire from spreading and we expect more assistance today from water bombers. The danger isn't over yet." He repeated a request that people avoid using Highway 12 where at all possible.

I felt a lot less worried about the fire, so I lingered for a while over toast and marmalade while I wondered if Brenda had run into any flak yet about our 'illicit' kiss. Illicit, hell! It was entirely up to Brenda who she kissed and why. But it seemed a given that small communities tended to discuss everyone's business. And voice sundry opinions thereon.

I took over from George at five o'clock, as usual. He said most of his day had been spent supplying beer to tired firefighters coming off shift and I noticed a distinct smell of stale smoke permeating the air.

George noticed me sniffing. "It'll disappear," he said. "It won't help to leave the front door open; we'd just get more of it."

Later on, when Ward and Gwendolyn Best came in, they weren't quite so charitable. "Can't you do something about that awful smell?" Gwendolyn demanded. "I came in here to have a relaxing drink and what I get is the stink of dead fireplace. It's bad enough that we get the smell of smoke everywhere we go outside."

I resisted the impulse to croon, 'oh, poor baby!' at her and explained that we were giving free beer to the fire-fighters. Gwendolyn opened her mouth and I thought she was going to continue complaining, but she thought better of it.

Ward ordered a Maiden's Prayer, and Gwen decided to have a mango daiquiri. The daiquiri was easy, but I had to sneak a look at the recipe book for Ward's drink. Rum, brandy, triple sec, and lemon juice. He certainly liked his drinks complicated.

The after-work and TGIF drinkers hadn't arrived yet, so the bar was nearly empty. When I took the Bests' drinks to their table, Gwendolyn said, "Can you answer a question for me?"

"I'll do my best."

"Are all small-town people nosy?"

"Probably no more so than city people. Why do you ask?"

"Because of something that happened to me early yesterday morning," Gwendolyn said, with a frown. "We rented a waterfront house on Tweedsmuir Road and moved in last week."

Tweedsmuir Road was old money and big houses. I hoped they'd stay there and stop thinking about replacing Elizabeth's hotel with a condo.

"Well," Gwendolyn went on, "I have two black royal poodles and I take them for a walk every morning."

Her story was interrupted by Ward. "We were going to bring our boys in here while we had a drink yesterday but that man who's here during the day said dogs aren't allowed. Is that right?"

"That's correct. Only human animals are allowed in the bar." I'd never tell him that when Elizabeth asked us to dog-sit Bernie, he was allowed to lie behind the bar, under the counter. Once in a while, he'd sneak out just a few feet to have a look around, but nobody had ever said they minded. So far.

Now Ward was frowning. "I can understand that, if animals aren't properly trained, but our poodles would cause no trouble."

"I'm sorry," I said, though of course I wasn't. The Wards didn't like the smell of smoke, but most people didn't like the smell of wet dogs. The poodles, with their thick hair and the way the rain was coming down outside, would not just be wet, but soaked. "Those are hotel rules and there's nothing we can do about them." I looked at Gwendolyn. "So, what happened when you walked your dogs?"

"Well," she said, "I was walking along, minding my own business, when a car came from behind me, slowed down, and stopped. The driver opened her window and said, 'You must be Gwendolyn. I'm Sherry Stewart and I'm really glad to meet you.'"

Gwendolyn paused and looked at me as if expecting a comment.

"What bothered you about that?"

She pursed her lips, then spoke. "Well, it seemed to me like she was trying to force an introduction, and then I thought she'd probably want to come to the house and look at our furniture."

"Sherry Stewart has likely already seen the furniture in every house in the village, and then some," I said. "She often collects money for charity and also campaigns for politicians now and then."

"Well, I know all that now," Gwendolyn said. "But at the time, I thought it was too pushy for words. In the city, nobody would speak like that to a stranger."

"But she turned out not to be a stranger after all, isn't that right, Gwenny?" Ward said.

Gwendolyn took a gulp of her daiquiri and glared at Ward. "That's right. It's a weird coincidence, but she's an old friend of the people we lived beside in Winnipeg. She said Edna had phoned her and told her all about us."

"It's just small-town friendliness," I said. "People like to know who their neighbors are."

"Yes, but..." Gwendolyn hesitated.

"Oh, stop worrying about it, honey," Ward said. "If we're going to live in this town, we'll have to get used to everybody knowing who we are and where we live."

It was nice to hear he was catching on, but I didn't dare laugh.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the three girls from the bank shed dripping wet raincoats onto the rack at the entrance and come in for their usual Friday night gossip. That released me

from the obligation of standing still and being polite to the Wards. I excused myself and headed toward the table where the bank girls were settling in for a couple of happy hours of chit-chat. If the village gossip performed as it usually did, by the time a month had passed, it would know a whole lot more about the Wards than their names and their address.

Sheila, Ann, and Laura all smiled up at me. "I'll have a gin and orange," Sheila said.

"A Blue for me," Ann said.

"I'd like a kiss," Laura said.

Oh, hell, the flak was starting already! But what did I expect? "Sorry, Laura, but we're all out of kisses. Can I get you something else?"

All three girls giggled. Laura said, "If I can't have a kiss, I'll have a rye and ginger."

"Coming up." I fixed their drinks and brought them back to the table, bracing myself for the teasing I knew was coming.

"Seriously, Larry," Sheila said, "aren't you worried that Charlie Farrow will come gunning for you?"

"I don't think he will," I said. "Charlie's a reasonable guy."

"Reasonable!" exclaimed Ann. "Charlie's a lawyer, and they're not reasonable. He'll sue you for alienation of something or other."

"I think the term is 'alienation of affections'." I didn't want to say anything until I'd had a chance to talk to Brenda. And Charlie, too, for that matter. "Anyway, I don't think he could do that unless he and Brenda were married. And they're not."

"I know," Sheila said, "but they've been going out together for a year. No, it must be two years by now. That's practically as good as being married."

"Not legally, it isn't." The situation was complicated. Brenda and I both had to keep the secret of Charlie's true sexuality. I couldn't out him by revealing that he and Brenda had a brother/sister relationship. So that meant we would have to put up with people thinking that Brenda was having sex with both of us.

Laura said, "I saw them having lunch together in the Princess Café today. It didn't look like they were fighting. Maybe she hasn't told him about you yet. But she'd better hurry up, because by this time on Monday, everybody will know."

I knew that Brenda would have told Charlie at lunch about the famous kiss, so he'd be prepared for any digs coming his way. We would have to do our threesome get-together in The Maggie as soon as it could be arranged.

I was about to turn away from the table when Ann grabbed my arm. "Larry, I have gossip and you'll never believe it!"

"Try me!" I was more than game for any gossip that wasn't about me.

"Do you remember Hollis Kirby?"

"Yeah. He came here from Calgary to be assistant bank manager, didn't he? And then he went back there about three days later, and nobody knows why."

I did know why but couldn't say so. He was one of Gina's rapists and she'd gone to talk to the bank manager about it. Hollis immediately got fired and blabbed the whole story to me before he staggered drunk out of The Maggie and climbed on board the Greyhound.

"Well, I saw him!" Ann said triumphantly. "Arnie and I were in Calgary visiting relatives a couple of weeks ago and we went to a McDonald's for a burger. Hollis was working there. So maybe he got fired from the bank."

"Did you talk to him?" I asked.

Ann shook her head. "No, as soon as he saw me, he scooted into the back."

"Well, well," I said. "If he's flipping burgers now, that does sound like he got fired."

I was tempted to offer more suggestions, just to keep the speculation going, but more customers were coming in. "Sorry, gotta love you and leave you. Duty calls."

I was glad to be busy, so I wouldn't have to talk—or listen—to anyone. But I couldn't help thinking about my own situation. And I couldn't help getting annoyed. Sure, Brenda and I loved to gossip, loved to know what was going on in the village, but we were just curious little flies on the wall. We didn't tell other people how to live or what to think. And it was nobody else's business what we did or thought. If Brenda wanted to sleep with two guys, or four, or six, or ten, that was her right.

I checked my own reactions. How would I feel if I knew Brenda was sleeping with Charlie? But it didn't seem to bother me. My relationship with Brenda was my business. Hers with Charlie was her business. Neither of us owned her.

The bar was full until almost one o'clock. Some of the firefighters came in to celebrate the fire being now under control. Not out, but under control. Everybody in the bar celebrated with them, including me.

My mother turned up, which happened maybe once a year, for some really special occasion. I had to admit she knew how to pick them. She even had Susan in tow. I bought them both a drink.

"Where's Buck?" I asked.

"Sleeping," Susan said, displaying a sulky little frown below her bangs. "He's been up on the mountain the last two days. And now he's going back to the woods to work tomorrow early. I think they should have let him have more time off."

I tried to defuse her mood by saying, "It's thanks to him, and a bunch of guys like him, that the fire's under control."

Susan said, "But I've hardly seen him this trip."

Mom and I exchanged wry glances, and I went back behind the bar to celebrate in relative peace.

Chapter 7 Brenda gets a shock

Having Saturday off work always felt like a bonus. When I was in my twenties, I worked in retail and rarely had a whole weekend off, but since going into real estate, I got to sleep in on at least half my Saturdays. So, naturally, I stayed in bed until ten, waking up now and then to luxuriate in warm, soft blankets and enjoyed the thought of sleeping until I was in the mood to wake up.

Once I did get up, I moseyed around slowly, getting washed and dressed, and finally sat on the floor to give DeeCee a brushing. DeeCee's real name was Petunia, and she might have had a cute petunia face as a kitten, but at eighteen, she wasn't cute, just an old lady with a tangled gray mop of hair and a strong sense of entitlement. She also wasn't much interested in anything but food and sleep, so she soon disdained the brush and marched into the kitchen to sit in front of her dish.

After I fed DeeCee and plugged in the kettle, I went onto my back veranda to enjoy the cool morning sunlight and to check out the Mount Arrowsmith fire. Wisps of smoke were still rising, but I'd heard that firefighters had the fire under control and hoped to have it completely beaten in the next couple of days. I crossed my fingers that the absence of rain wasn't going to mess things up for them. That reminded me of Gina's comment on Tuesday night about her father and Bert Zacharias going hunting. Had they gone up Arrowsmith? Many old logging roads that led off Highway 12 or Zillinsky Road wound up and down those slopes, still navigable with a four-wheel drive vehicle.

Luisa Benedetti answered the phone, and I asked her that question.

"Yes, Brenda, but they come home late Wednesday. They are fine."

"I'm glad! It's lucky they made it home before the fire started. Did they get anything?"

"One deer. My Carlo shot it." She huffed. "Not much meat on half one little deer, but we feast for a few days."

I thought about asking to speak to Gina, but she'd be working at the library or studying, so I wouldn't bother her. Anyway, I was more than ready for some quiet time to hang out with myself, so I made a mug of coffee and sat at the dining room table. Last Sunday's *New York Times* crossword puzzle still lay there, half-done, and I managed to find another few answers, but my brain seemed more interested in reviewing what was going on in my life. I put the pen down, took another sip of jet fuel, and let my mind go where it wanted to go.

It had been a crazy week. Aside from working every day, I'd gone to an Amazon Club meeting on Tuesday, had dinner with Charlie on Wednesday, and then a bridge lesson at the high school. Then all hell broke loose.

After the bridge lesson, I'd gone to The Maggie for a drink. By the time I was ready to leave, the bar was empty and Carol Jenkins, who wandered past the entrance at exactly the wrong moment, caught Larry and me kissing. Of course, she had broadcast that news to the world, potentially wrecking my reputation, if not my life.

On Thursday, Mount Arrowsmith started burning, which was a much more serious wrecking of my home environment. Also, I'd had lunch with Charlie, warning him that the cat was out of the bag and to be prepared for questions and comments, polite or otherwise. He laughed, thanked me for the warning, and told me not to worry about him. I had no intention of worrying about him; I'd never seen anyone get the better of him in verbal sparring.

It was not until Friday morning that I got the blast from Anne-Marie. I'd barely walked in through the door to reception, when she stood up and glared at me.

"Brenda, I never dreamed you could be so stupid!"

I decided not to make it easy for her. After all, if I felt like kissing Larry in the bar of the Wayfarer Inn, it was my business, not hers. "What are you talking about?"

She glared harder. "You know perfectly well what I'm talking about! You betrayed that beautiful man who loves you by kissing a stupid bartender! Out in plain view! The whole thing is unbelievable. Charlie's not only sexy and handsome, but he's a lawyer, so he's probably rich. You just don't know how lucky you are. If you'd played your cards right, he'd have married you. Maybe he still will, in spite of Larry."

"Charlie doesn't want to get married. Neither do I."

"I don't believe you."

"Why?"

"Why!" She was nearly screaming at me. "Because everybody wants to get married. It's what people do. Every one of them. It's what life is all about." She paused for breath and began again. "You're talking sour grapes, that's all. If Charlie had asked you to marry him, you'd have been Mrs. Farrow months ago!"

"You know that I've been married twice and neither marriage worked out. I don't do marriage well, Anne-Marie, and I'm not going to try it again." I started heading for my cubicle, but she wasn't through with me.

"How else are you going to keep Charlie, if you don't marry him? Don't you want your relationship with him to be forever?"

I turned toward her. "Marriage doesn't guarantee permanence. People think it's supposed to, but it doesn't. You make it sound like marriage to Charlie would mean that I own him, and he owns me."

She slowed down a trifle. "But isn't that what you want? Didn't you kiss Larry to make Charlie realize he's lucky, to make him propose?"

I sighed. "Didn't you hear what I said? Don't you understand? Neither of us wants to get married."

"You could live together, though I don't believe that's right, either."

"That's just the same as being married, with the same advantages and disadvantages, but without the little piece of paper that says it's legal. We don't want to get married, and we don't want to live together."

"You can't have broken up with Charlie yet," Anne-Marie said. "I saw you having lunch with him yesterday. Or are you hoping he won't hear about you and Larry?"

"In this town? You have got to be joking! Of course, Charlie was going to hear about it from somebody sooner or later. That's why I told him myself."

Anne-Marie's eyes widened. "You did? And you're still an item?"

"As much of an item as we've ever been."

She sank back into her swivel chair. "Then I really don't understand. You're asking for a heap of trouble, fooling around with Larry. And if Charlie doesn't beat the shit out of Larry, he's not the man I thought he was." She took a deep breath. "Maybe he will, once he gets over the shock."

I escaped in the direction of my office. Not everyone would hold opinions like Anne-Marie's. She was one of the most conservative women I knew, in spite of being only in her late twenties. And not everyone would be as rude. All of us in the office put up with Anne-Marie's

strong opinions because she'd been working for the company since she graduated from high school and was brilliant at her job. She'd been married for nine of those years, but had no children, and I wondered if a thwarted desire for children was why she kept on playing mother-hen to Paul, Ross, and me.

It occurred to me then that I couldn't recall her being rude to Dane. But perhaps she knew or sensed that he would never have stood for it.

I'd almost reached the sanctuary of my office, when Ross stuck his curly head out of his own cubicle. "Hey, Brenda! If you decide to include married men in your repertoire, I'm available."

I retorted with a couple of words much ruder than Anne-Marie would ever dream of voicing. Ross grinned, gave me a thumbs-up, and ducked back into his space. I retreated into mine, relieved that I'd survived the office comments so easily. Paul wouldn't say anything because he was completely wrapped up in the realty business and seemed unaware that other people had lives. I got the impression that gossip never even registered in his brain, for I'd never heard him repeat any or make comments.

Which left everybody else in the town, of course, but maybe it was karma. Larry and I had spent so much time sharing village gossip, maybe fate had decreed that we provide some of our own. On the other hand, since I didn't believe in karma or fate, I'd simply have to attribute this mess to the law of averages.

Now it was Saturday, and I had the day to myself. I knew there'd be more comments and teasing to deal with, but I didn't need to worry about them yet. After I'd stared out the window for a bit, I decided the fall garden chores could go on waiting for a while since twenty-four hours of steady rain had made everything in the yard soaking wet. However, I couldn't use that excuse to get out of dealing with the dust and clutter in the house. DeeCee lay on her favorite bed, the old oak sideboard, and barely opened an eye as I did my duty with vacuum cleaner and duster.



At five, the rain was pelting down again. I walked the few blocks to Larry's apartment under my red and yellow striped umbrella, enjoying the damp air and hoping the rain would drown what was left of the fire. He buzzed me in, and I went up in the elevator. When the door slid open, he was waiting for me right there.

He wrapped his arms around me in a long hug, then stepped back. "I missed you last night."

It was only when I found myself wanting that warm hug to go on and on, that I realized Anne-Marie's words had bothered me more than I expected them to. Under the circumstances, Charlie, Larry, and I all being single and childless, there was nothing wrong with what we were doing, but it would be difficult without the tacit approval, or at least tolerance, of the community.

"I got a thorough dressing-down from Anne-Marie yesterday and didn't feel like running the gauntlet at The Maggie as well. Anyway, I wanted to talk to you first and decide how we should handle the gossip."

This was the first time I'd been in his apartment. A quick glance told me it would be as bright and cheerful as my house on a sunny day. There were a lot of books but not much furniture. I followed Larry into the kitchen, and he handed me my favorite drink, with plenty of lemon slices. I'd told him I liked slices better than wedges. Biting into a wedge sometimes made lemon juice squirt into my eye. I'd learned the hard way that lemon juice stings.

He said, "You might have been okay; it was mostly people celebrating the rain, and the forest fire being under control. But I don't blame you for not coming." He took my hand and led

me to the couch in the living room, where we sat side by side, looking out his balcony sliding doors at rain falling on the village.

I took a sip of my effervescent drink. "When I said to Charlie that you and I were an item, he suggested we all three go together to The Maggie for a drink on a busy night. Probably a Friday, if you're going to have one off. I told you Charlie likes to flaunt his male attractiveness, but obviously he's happy to flaunt other things, too."

Larry laughed. "Good on him! Sure, I think that's a great idea, even just to prove that he and I aren't going to pound hell out of each other to establish sole rights to your company."

"As if! The pleasure of my company is mine to give where I please."

"Charlie and I know that. Now we have to convince people like Anne-Marie." Larry opened the calendar on his phone. "I can take off this coming Friday, the 19th. You okay with that?"

I checked my own phone. "Yes, it's fine. Let me find out what Charlie says." But Charlie was not answering his phone. "Well, he's in a meeting or else feels like being out of contact with the world. I'll call him later."

For a little while, we sat in companionable silence. Then I said, "Any gossip?"

"Nope. Even the speculations about Dane are dying down. It's nearly three weeks since he disappeared, and I guess people are running out of ideas." Larry went on to recount the news Demaratus had told him on Thursday. "The strangest thing is him walking out of his house with a bottle of scotch in hand and simply disappearing."

"Somebody must have picked him up."

"Yeah, but who and why?"

I considered. "I still think it was a woman and the secrecy could well be because they didn't want to be seen together."

Larry shook his head. "Maybe, but he'd have had some story to give the office. I can't see Dane wandering off anywhere, even for a hot vacation, without letting his clients know."

"The money being more important than the honey?"

"For Dane, yes." Larry stretched his long legs out in front and crossed them at the ankle. "I'm wondering the same thing about Elizabeth. She's due back in a little less than two weeks and I sure would like to know what she's decided to do with the hotel. At least her house is safe from the fire now. And the rest of the village."

"That's a huge relief. I was thinking about all the people I know who live here, like the Benedettis, and my buddy Catherine, for starters. The list goes on and on. Was your Mom worried?"

Larry smiled. "I doubt it. She's so positive she can handle anything that happens that she doesn't waste time worrying. She did have the car packed, though."

"Which is more than I managed. However, I did get out the cat carrier in case DeeCee and I had to make a run for it." My mind roamed back to the subject of the hotel. "If Elizabeth sells, Ward Best and his Gwendolyn will become permanent blisters on the landscape. That's not a happy thought."

"Blisters?" Larry grinned. "I didn't know landscapes could blister, but that would sure fit with the fire." He rose. "Come on out to the kitchen and watch me be a chef. I'll make you another drink, too."

"Do you need help with the chef gig?"

"You'll be surprised how good I am with a paring knife and a lot of onion."

He built another drink for me and opened a bottle of red wine. I could tell by the appetizing odor of seafood wafting out of the oven that he'd already done most of his chef's chores. I sat at

one end of the kitchen table, which was already set with plates and silverware, watching him put together a Greek salad, while I occasionally stole a black olive from the jar sitting much too close to me.

"I'm thinking about taking courses again. The thing is, what I want to learn about won't help me in a career."

"So what?" Larry sliced tiny cherry tomatoes into the salad.

That stopped me for just a moment. "I guess I'm still hearing my father's voice telling me that I need a college degree, so I can make something of myself."

Larry leaned down and kissed my forehead. "You're already something. And you say you like being in real estate sales. What do you want to study?"

"Meteorology and climatology."

He raised his eyebrows. "You intending to forecast the weather?"

"Oh, no, nothing so practical. But I think this panic about global warming is way over the top and, if I want the facts, I have to study climate science."

"Wow! That sounds heavy."

"But it's the only way I can judge what's being said. The media are all screaming that the sky is going to fall, but I've read some articles by scientists who say it isn't. Who am I going to believe?"

"I see what you mean." He opened the oven, took out a casserole dish, and put it on a hot pad on the table.

"That looks and smells wonderful." There's nothing like the mouth-watering aroma of food to take one's mind off science.

He grinned. "Pasta with seafood sauce. My signature dish. And that's because it's easy."

"I always knew you could do more than just sling beer."

"Watch your mouth or I'll drop some in your hair." He handed me a large serving spoon and indicated that I should help myself to the casserole. "Learning the science of our atmosphere could take you a while."

"I know and it's not as though my life isn't already full of projects. Like earning a living! But that doesn't seem to matter. I want to know the truth, Larry. I'm too much of a skeptic to simply accept what other people say."

"Even experts?"

"Experts aren't perfect. And scientists disagree with one another. After all, that's what science is about; testing theories until there's simply nothing more you can do to prove they're wrong." I reached for the salad bowl.

He ate a mouthful of the seafood mixture and sighed with satisfaction. "If you have the patience, go for it! And then explain it all to me, because I'd like to know, too. I've heard people talk about global warming and I've kept out of the conversation. I know nothing about the subject, so I don't have an opinion."

"That's a deal." I ate a little salad, then a little of the casserole. "Five stars, Larry! You are a great chef."

Twenty minutes later, we took coffees and brandies into the living room and curled up on the couch. I felt like I'd eaten far too much and told myself I'd cut back next day. Naturally, I thought the exact same thing after dining at Maxima with Charlie. Maybe I should find a boyfriend who could neither cook nor afford Maxima.

Larry interrupted my thoughts. "You have a habit that I've been curious about ever since I noticed it. Why do you sit with your back against the wall when you're at a table in The Maggie? You even do it at the bar."

That was true. I always picked the bar stool next to the wall, so I could lean against it. "I don't like surprises. I want to know what's coming."

"Yes, okay, but why?"

I hadn't thought about the 'why' for a long time, but I knew what it was. "Childhood trauma, I guess you'd call it. My father was into physical pain as punishment. The trouble was that I never got any warning. He'd walk up behind me and slap the side of my head. Then he'd swing me around and give me supreme shit, which he'd finish off by hitting me again."

"What a prick!"

"Yeah, that's what I thought then, too. It's what I still think."

"Didn't your mother stick up for you?"

"Sure, but the first slap always came without any warning. She gave him hell for doing that, but she was never in time to prevent it."

Larry raised my hand to his lips and kissed it. "Okay, I can see why you don't have much to do with him."

"If there was some reason in his past for doing things that way, I might be able to forgive him. But the major reason I avoid Gavin is because he's convinced he's right about everything. When he's around, I always feel about five years old and guilty of every sin in the world."

"It's a good thing he lives in Victoria and not here."

"I'm thankful for that every time he crosses my mind."

Larry untangled his legs from mine and went off to the kitchen to get fresh coffee and brandy. I stood up, stretched, and crossed to the floor-to-ceiling bookcase that stood against the opposite wall. There were hundreds of books, organized into categories. Science fiction took up most of the space, but a couple of shelves were devoted to reference books, many on the subject of poker. Next to those was a text on psychology.

I took the book off the shelf, curious to see what the table of contents told me. But the book fell open to a bookmark and I saw a paragraph underlined in red:

Psychological projection is a theory stating that humans defend themselves against their own unconscious impulses (both positive and negative) by denying their existence in themselves while attributing them to others. For example, a person who is habitually intolerant may constantly accuse other people of being intolerant.

Larry came back, and I took the psych text with me when I sat next to him. "Why the interest in psychology?"

He grinned. "It helps me make better bets at poker."

"I'll bet it helps, too, when you have some customer in the bar crying on your shoulder and wanting you to tell him he's right." I opened to the page with the underlined paragraph. "Is that marked for a special reason?"

"Only because I found it interesting. It describes the way a guy in my poker group acted. That was Hank, you know, the guy who has a wasp phobia and is back in the psych ward because of it."

"I knew him to say hello to, but nothing more."

"Hank was always angry, always ready to start a fight. And he accused others of doing exactly that."

"Sounds like he had some serious childhood trauma. I wonder if the shrinks will deal with that while he's in treatment."

"I guess so. He always seemed like a bomb threatening to explode." Larry sipped his brandy. "Do you think that theory could apply to Anne-Marie? From what you've told me, she seems to jump at every opportunity to tell people they're offending against social mores. Well, her social mores, anyway."

I realized that our gossip was far less about who was sleeping with who than about why they were doing so, the never-ending fascination with why humans do the things they do. "If that's true, does it mean that she wants to do the things she rails about, like having two boyfriends, or cheating on a spouse?"

"You know her better than I do," Larry said.

"Well, she's been married for nine years and maybe she's bored. It's possible that she'd like to have a fling, but doesn't want to admit it, even to herself. Maybe she wants children, and her husband doesn't, and she believes she has to live with that. If psychological projection is what she's doing, she'd never admit to those desires, would she?"

"Not likely," Larry said. "If she starts giving you hell again, see if you can pick up any clues."

I laughed. "Good idea. It might make her harangues easier to take."

Larry put down his empty brandy snifter and slid his arm around me. "How about me? Am I easy to take?"

"Oh, I think you slide down as smooth and tasty as a seafood casserole."

"You have a thing about food."

"And about you."

Then his lips were on mine, and I couldn't say a word. Which was quite okay because there were several other interesting things we could do. Would do. Did do.



Sunday dawned bright, sunny, and calm and looked like it would drift by without drama. Except, of course, the drama I'd create at archery practice by missing the target completely and murdering one of the cedars in Toby's back yard. That is, if I was lucky enough to hit anything at all. Most times I had to spend ten minutes searching through the salal and blackberry vines to find my arrow.

Charlie dropped in for coffee midmorning, and found me hunched over the computer keyboard, trying to decide whether to take an online course in meteorology or to buy a college textbook and just read it.

He refused to give me an opinion. "It's your project; you decide how to do it."

But he did agree to a three-way date with Larry and me on Friday night, the 19th. "That should be a blast," he said. "I can't wait to see the faces. Let's make sure we walk in together, with you in the middle, holding hands with both of us."

I couldn't help laughing. Charlie sat at the other end of the kitchen table, grinning. He was such a delight to spend time with and, even on the weekend, when he was relaxing, a delight to look at. I'd asked him once how he managed to look so clean and pressed and trim in jeans and sweatshirt, but he shrugged it off and said it came naturally.

He held out his cup for more coffee and I poured for both of us. "Brenda, I have something to tell you."

"That sounds serious."

"It might be. Then again, it might not."

His expression was serious, which concerned me. Charlie was rarely serious. He'd told me once that being serious about his work was enough.

He sighed. "I think I'm in love."

I was shocked into silence. Charlie in love? But...

He read my face accurately. "Sex isn't the same as love, you know."

"I know. But they quite often go together. Who is she?"

"Gina Benedetti."

I nearly dropped my coffee mug. "Gina! When?" I felt uncomfortable and realized, with another shock, that I was just a tad jealous. Well, I didn't mind if he was in love with her, but I didn't want to lose him. And that's what a friend falling in love usually means; the person disappears out of your life and sometimes is never seen again.

"It's your own fault," Charlie said, smiling at me. "You sent me off to the local library to do research."

He was quite right. "So, what happened? When did lightning strike?"

"When I first saw her. She's a beautiful woman." He looked at my face. "Oh, it wasn't the physical beauty. It was the fact that she seems unaware of it, and the fact that she does nothing to enhance it. No makeup, no frills."

I nodded. "I know. With Gina, what you see is what you get. She's genuine. I'm glad you recognized that."

"We talked about Deception Bay's history, and when it was time for her break, I took her to the Princess Café, and we had coffee. I told her the bare outline of my case and she reacted as if she were interested. She promised to ask her parents if they know any good gossip about the Tweedsmuir family."

"If she promised, she'll do it."

Charlie said, "Are you and Gina friends?"

"Yes," I said. That uncomfortable feeling that might have been jealousy had gone away. Charlie and I had a solid relationship. We were friends. We could tell each other anything and everything.

"Anything you'd like to tell me?" Charlie asked. Then he shook his head and frowned. "No, don't bother. Gina isn't going to be interested in me."

"Gina would be happy to have you as a friend, once she gets to know you."

"But I can't give her what most women want."

"Charlie," I said, "just relax. Take it easy. Take your time. Friendship is precious. And you don't know yet what she wants or doesn't want."

Nor could I tell him, because I didn't know either. I couldn't tell him Gina had been gang-raped and might not ever want a sexual relationship. Nor could I tell her that Charlie was asexual.

"Tongue-tied" means you can't say anything. And my tongue was tied every which way.

Chapter 8 Larry plays a game

On Tuesday night, the firefighters came in for a party, celebrating the fact that the fire was now completely out, and they could go back to their regular jobs. George and I had decided giving them free beer was the least we could do. Elizabeth might have something to say about that when she came back but, in the circumstances, we didn't think she'd mind.

Jerry, his red hair sticking out in all directions like a little kid's, left his table and came to sit on a bar stool. He raised his third free beer in a toast to something or other, maybe just to life in general. "Man, that fire was a mean sucker! Didn't think we'd ever get it beat."

"Well, I can tell you, everybody's glad you did."

"But it wasn't all us," Jerry said. "That rain over the weekend helped a lot."

"What's the total damage? Do you know?" I'd been much too busy catching up with the hotel bookkeeping and banking and putting out little administrative fires in the cleaning department to listen to the news.

Jerry shrugged. "I heard around six, seven hundred acres. Lotta good wood got burned up in that. But that's not the only thing got burned."

"What else is up there?" As far as I knew, the only things up on Mount Arrowsmith were logging roads and forest. And, of course, Highway 12, which wound around the lower slopes on its way to the west coast, and Zillinsky Road, which went up to the ski lodge.

"A cabin," Jerry replied. "An old shack that Bert Zacharias built up there years ago. He used to sleep in it when he was hunting deer in the fall. And maybe when his wife got mad and kicked him out of the house, for all I know."

"I never saw it, and I used to drive most of those old roads."

"You wouldn't see it. It was a couple hundred yards off Zillinsky Road, which you have to pay attention to because it's graveled and full of ruts. Had a track so you could drive in, but when Bert quit using it, that got so overgrown you couldn't find it unless you knew where to look." Jerry paused, then leaned closer. "I guess I'm not supposed to say anything, but there was a body in that cabin."

I'd been looking around, trying to see who needed another beer, but that comment got my full attention. "A body? Like from years ago?"

"Who knows? There wasn't much left of it. The skull and some bits of leg bones." Jerry lowered his voice still further. "And a gun lying beside the bones."

"I wonder who it was." My mind had already jumped to Dane Soper, but I decided that idea was probably not worth betting on and discarded it. "Maybe a hunter, but I don't remember anybody from around here going missing. Not in my time, anyway."

"No, me neither," Jerry said. "Anyway, the cops will likely figure it out. That's who said not to spread the news." He grinned. "Not that there's much hope. Four of us found the body and that kinda news is too good to keep to yourself."

"How'd you find it, if the cabin was all burned up?"

"Coming down the road, we saw what looked like an old box standing upright, about the size of a coffin, you know? So, we stopped and had a look. The box turned out to be a fridge, burnt to rat shit. Then we saw the skull half-buried in ashes. We thought maybe it was an animal skull, like a bear or a deer, but Bill said we ought to call the cops. And when they got there, they said no, the skull was human, and told us thanks, but bugger off now, we'll take care of it."

"Larry!" Somebody hollered from the far end of the bar, so I had to leave and take a tray of beers down there to ease thirsty throats. When I got back, I poured another one for Jerry.

"Thanks," he said. "This is going down real smooth, but it better be the last one. I gotta go to work tomorrow. And I gotta get some sleep; I'm beat."

I delivered more drinks and we speculated about who the body had been. I asked, "What kind of rifle was it next to the bones?"

"Wasn't a rifle," Jerry said. "It was a revolver, and I don't know anything about them."

"Not a hunter, then," I said. "Nobody goes hunting with a revolver."

"Don't count on that. Some people have crazy ideas about what's allowable in killing sports."

I had another thought. "Did you tell them who owned the cabin?"

Jerry nodded. "Sure. Anyway, that land belongs to the crown, not to Zacharias, so technically, he didn't own the building neither. But back in the day, nobody would have got uptight about him putting a shack there. It was after the old-growth had been logged and nobody was using the property for anything."

"And now the second-growth is gone, too."

"A lot of it," Jerry said. He put down his empty glass. "Okay, thanks, Larry. I'm outta here."

"You driving?"

"Walking. Four beers wouldn't affect my driving, but it's not worth risking a breathalyzer. Anyway, it's only three blocks."

He headed out through the archway and met Brenda on her way in. They stopped to talk for a minute before she wove her way among the full tables and took Jerry's stool at the bar.

I handed her a gin and tonic. "I'm glad you came. I didn't think you'd run the gauntlet tonight. Or maybe nobody told you the firefighters were celebrating?"

"Oh, yes, I knew," she said, settling herself more comfortably on the stool. "But I thought the guys would be so busy celebrating they wouldn't notice me."

I glanced around the bar. Everybody was drinking and talking, rehashing the drama of the fire, who did what to stop it, who did stuff that was stupid, and who was a hero. Nobody was paying any attention to us. "I suspect you're right." I decided it was late enough that I could pour myself a drink.

After I got the Heineken out of the cooler, I said, "So, have you heard about the body?"

"Body?" Her glass was frozen halfway to her lips and her eyes were wide.

"The grapevine isn't as fast as usual. But since the firefighters didn't get down off the mountain until late this afternoon, I guess not everybody knows yet."

"Larry!" The call from Billy's table had me hurrying over with more beer.

When I came back, Brenda said, "You sure do know how to create suspense! What body? Where?"

I told her what Jerry had told me.

"Do you suppose it might be Dane?" she asked.

"That was my first thought, but it seems too weird. Cabins in the bush have never been Dane's kind of hang-out. A hotel bar, yes; the Riviera, very likely. But not a shack in the woods."

"But somebody must have picked him up from his house. Maybe the shack belonged to that person."

"I doubt it. Jerry said it belonged to Bert Zacharias and that he hasn't used it in years. And why would Dane go anyplace with a chronically unemployed drunk?"

Brenda shook her head and pushed her blonde hair back over her shoulders. "You're right; it doesn't make any sense. But now the cops are investigating, they'll be doing DNA tests and so on and eventually we'll find out who it was."

By eleven o'clock, the crowd was thinning out. Like Jerry, most of them had to go to work in the morning. For a while I was kept busy clearing glasses and wiping tables but, finally, I came back to my position behind the bar, keeping an eye on the last two tables of drinkers.

I poured another drink for Brenda, managing to brush her hand with mine as I handed it to her. I treasure little touches like that. Subtle, but they say a lot. "Any gossip?" I asked.

Brenda laughed. "Of course there is! I haven't seen you since Saturday night. Almost three whole days!"

"Sunday morning," I amended.

She smiled at me. We were both quiet for a minute, remembering Saturday night and Sunday morning.

"Charlie dropped by on Sunday afternoon," she said. "He told me he'd met Gina and he thinks he's in love."

It was my turn to be startled. "In love?"

"As he said to me, you can have love without sex."

I paused for a few seconds while I wrapped my mind around that. "Okay, I agree. But having sex with it is a lot more fun."

"So have some sympathy for the guy. Falling in love with Gina isn't likely to have a happy ending."

"Unless..."

Brenda nodded. "I thought of that, too. Maybe the rape turned her off sex for life."

"She might feel that way now, but it happened only a few months ago. In time, she could change her mind." Then the sound of customers pushing chairs back reminded me I had work to do. The last of the drinkers wandered off. I cleaned the tables, then came back to Brenda. In a way, it was like a married couple coming home from work and sitting down to exchange the news of their day. A comfortable sort of feeling.

"Well," Brenda said, "that was refreshing. Nobody in here paid me the slightest attention. All Jerry did was say hello and talk about what happened with the fire."

"The only thing Jerry's interested in, aside from his family, is poker."

"I wish Anne-Marie could be more like him," Brenda said. "Naturally, she saw Charlie having coffee with Gina on Saturday, and yesterday she gave me another blast."

"How so?"

"In her mind, Charlie must be dating Gina because I've betrayed him. And now I'm going to lose him to a younger, more beautiful woman, and it's all my own fault."

"Sounds like a kindergarten spat," I said. "She was saying, 'I told you so!'"

"Yes, exactly. Except she used a lot more words." Brenda smiled. "You should have seen her face when I told her that I already knew about Charlie's coffee date and that he'd told me about it himself."

"Didn't that shut her up?" I opened myself another Heineken.

"Are you kidding? Then she started getting nasty. She asked me how many more men I was planning to add to my string, and I told her the truth."

"Are you adding more?"

She laughed. "No! Having two boyfriends is already more than enough trouble in a place like Deception Bay."

"Not everybody is like Anne-Marie."

Brenda sighed. "I know. And it's only because we've worked together for five or six years that she feels she can say anything she likes to me."

"What would happen if you told her to lay off?"

"She'd pretend to be so busy doing things for Paul and Ross that she would have no time to do work for me."

I hadn't thought about that. "So she's kind of got you by the short hairs."

"Yep. The last thing she said was that I was getting into deep water trying to have two boyfriends."

"Was that the last word?"

Brenda laughed. "For a change, I had the last one. I said I knew how to swim."

I reached across the bar and took her hand. "Never mind. Our three-way date this coming Friday will cause tongues to wag for a few days, then we'll no longer be the flavor of the week. Especially with a dead body to talk about." Then I thought of something else. "Hey, here's a thought! Maybe I should write an Agatha Christie style of story and call it *The Body in the Cabin*."

"Sounds like fun. Who would your killer be?"

I shook my head. "Not a clue."



Friday was my day off and I should have slept in, like I usually do. But I came awake at ten-thirty, the same as if it were a workday, and lay staring at the ceiling for a few minutes. Rolling over and burying my head under the sheet didn't help.

Then I realized that I was nervous about my date with Brenda and Charlie. That thought brought me so wide awake that I knew there was no hope of more sleep, so I got up and wandered over to the window. The sun was shining and everything out toward the west looked peaceful. I opened the window a tad and sniffed. The air was still faintly tarnished by the sharp tang of smoke and wet ashes.

Why was I nervous? The three of us were merely thumbing our noses at some conventional villagers and that wouldn't affect my job. Nobody would be mad at me. Some people would think I was crazy to willingly share my girlfriend with some other guy, but that wouldn't be anything new. Some guys thought I was nuts because I liked to read a lot.

It wasn't until I got out of the shower and put some coffee on to brew that I figured out why I was antsy. What could I talk to Charlie about? Brenda and I were old friends and could probably talk all day long, but I'd met Charlie only a couple of times and I had no idea what interested him, other than Brenda.

I poured a coffee and sat in the living room, where I could look east, over the village and a little bit of the bay, and added up what I knew. Okay, Charlie was a lawyer, but he wouldn't want to talk about his work, especially to somebody who wasn't one. He didn't play any sports, but neither did I, so that was a non-starter. Which left village gossip, the recent fire, and, possibly, politics. Except that my interest in politics ended right at the border of the village.

Maybe that was enough to get us started, though. I reminded myself that Brenda had been good friends with Charlie for at least a couple of years. She'd know what might work.

By the time I finished breakfast and tidied up the apartment, it was clear that I needed to go buy groceries or starve. By six o'clock, I'd bought groceries and put them away, spent two

contented hours in GallowGlass Secondhand Books in Breslow, and then come back to Deception Bay to have coffee with my Mom. I got two bonuses there. One was an apple pie fresh out of the oven with caramel ice cream on top, and the other a visit with my Gran, Dorinda. Gran was in her mid-eighties and also her right mind, and had more stories and opinions than anyone I knew. I wondered whether I'd be like that, too, when I was her age.

Mom put a bit of a damper on things by bringing up cousin Susan. "She called me, after Buck went back to work. Says he slapped her."

"Oh, go on!" Gran exclaimed. "That boy wouldn't slap a mosquito."

"I'm just telling you what she said."

"Has she got bruises?" I asked.

"I don't know," Mom said, sounding cross. "I'm only saying what she said on the phone. I haven't seen her."

On my way home to change, I wondered if we were all wrong about Buck and his good nature. Maybe he had a violent side that he'd kept well-hidden. I decided I'd better do a little probing next time he came home for his days off. And it wouldn't hurt to try for a heart-to-heart with Susan.

I put on a white shirt and a tie, because I was sure Charlie would be fairly formal in his dress and we should dress to match. That thought made me laugh. This date wasn't a competition but an extended joke. Well, not totally a joke. In a way, it was three of us telling the rest of our community to shut up and mind its own business.

As if! But maybe it would work.

I drove to Brenda's house and parked in front, since Charlie's classy black Mazda was in the driveway behind Brenda's Honda. I'd just closed my door and was heading for the sidewalk when Brenda and Charlie came out the front door and down the walk toward me.

For a minute there, I felt so awkward that I couldn't think of anything to say except "Hi!"

Brenda put her arm through mine. "Chill out, Larry! This can't possibly be the very first time anybody's done something like this."

"I bet it's the first time for Deception Bay!" I blurted.

Charlie laughed and said, "Hey, maybe we'll start a trend. Imagine what will happen if the *Vancouver Sun* sends somebody to interview us. Or let's go big and see if we can get the *Toronto Star* interested."

That idea made me laugh and shudder at the same time; then everything was fine. For a few minutes we discussed which car to take and finally agreed on the Mazda, which made a statement about sophistication and poise. Brenda's bright blue Honda made a statement, too, but it was too commercial for this gig. My car was too old to make statements; it merely moaned something profane about its engine or tires now and then. We even discussed walking, but that seemed way too casual, especially with Charlie and me both in shirt, tie, and jacket ensembles.

And Brenda, I realized, was wearing high heels and a red low-necked dress with a flirty skirt.

She saw my look. "I thought you'd never notice."

"Well, I'm so used to the jeans and plaid jacket, I never paid attention. You look really good." Actually, she looked gorgeous, but I was shy of saying that in front of Charlie.

Brenda slipped her coat around her shoulders and climbed into the back of the Mazda. "Let's go, guys. Charlie, you're my driver. Larry, you're my bodyguard. And, of course, I'm a princess."

Charlie parked at the far end of the hotel's parking lot on the beach, so that anyone sitting by the windows which stretched right across the north side of the bar would be able to see us

walking toward the hotel. Brenda linked one arm through my left and one through Charlie's right, and we strolled slowly across the lot toward the lower entrance.

"We should have practiced some new kind of dance routine," I muttered.

"Let's do that in the elevator," Brenda said, grinning.

"You sound high," I said. "Are you?"

"Not on booze," she replied. "It's the excitement. I'm tired of being polite and deferential and holding my tongue when I'm itching to say something. Tonight, I'm cutting loose!"

Charlie looked at me over the top of her head. "We'd better limit her to one drink. She's already off the wall."

"Hey, you guys," Brenda said. "Cut it out. I'm the princess here."

We all went quiet in the elevator. I barely had time, since we were going up only one floor, in an elevator that had been replaced barely three years before, to note that we wouldn't have had space to practice even one step of a dance routine.

We emerged from the elevator into the lobby. Brenda slung her coat onto the rack and put her arms through Charlie's and mine again. We turned smoothly to the right and walked abreast through the archway into the bar.

Friday night and the place was nearly full, the noise level high with chatter and clinking glasses, but there was an empty table beside the windows at the far end of the bar.

"That's perfect!" Charlie muttered. "Nobody's going to miss seeing this."

We headed for the empty table, now in single file, with Brenda holding one hand from each of us. We wove slowly among the tables, garnering startled looks as we went. The one thing missing, I thought, was me having Bernie on a lead so that he could bring up the rear.

Brenda squeezed my hand as we eased by Anne-Marie and her husband. The look on Anne-Marie's face alone was worth the whole display we were putting on. Her mouth was open, but nothing was coming out, and her stunned expression was beautiful to behold. Her husband, Ted, stared at us as if he couldn't believe what he was seeing.

At the table to the right of our own, the three girls from the bank, Sheila, Ann, and Laura, looked up and then did a double take. I smiled at them, and they looked down, as if embarrassed to be caught openly staring. Then quickly looked up again. A triple-take!

Ward and Gwendolyn Best sat at the table to the left of ours. They looked up when we pulled the chairs back, then went back to staring at the ocean view. Not being locals, they had no idea what was going on. I was glad Ward was silent; I wanted to belt him one merely for existing. Earlier, I'd seen him wandering around the edge of the Wayfarer property with a guy who I knew was a land surveyor based in Breslow. If he'd already hired a surveyor, he must be fairly sure he was going to get this hotel.

With some effort, I put Ward out of my mind. The three of us settled into our chairs, Brenda insisting on sitting with her back to the popular vista of Deception Bay and Coast Mountains. "I can see the bay any time," she said. "I want to see the faces."

And she liked to sit with her back to the wall. A window on the second floor would work just as well as a solid wall. Nobody could see in except a stray seagull.

Kelly, the tall redhead who worked my shifts when I had time off, quickly appeared to take our orders. After Charlie asked for scotch, neat, and Brenda for her gin and tonic, Kelly said, "A Heineken, Larry?" After I nodded, she paused, looking at all three of us with twinkling eyes. "You three should get an Oscar for that entrance."

"We thought a Friday night would have the biggest crowd," I said.

Kelly's gaze settled on Brenda. "Don't you think you're being just a little greedy, hon? Most of us would be happy with only one tall, handsome guy. And you've got two!" Her voice was loud enough that it could be heard at least two tables away.

Brenda knew Kelly was teasing. "Hey, if you've got it, flaunt it!"

Kelly laughed. "Right on!" She headed for the bar counter.

Brenda laughed, too. "Oh, did you see Anne-Marie's face? She looked like she'd swallowed her tongue."

"Yeah, but wait until Monday morning!" I said.

"Tell me about this Anne-Marie," Charlie said. "I recognized her as the receptionist in Paradise Realty, but I'd have said she was much too young to be so shocked at Brenda's having two boyfriends."

Brenda told Charlie about Anne-Marie's disapproval and described her lectures on morals, and I realized I wouldn't ever have to worry about what to discuss with Charlie. He was, like Brenda and me, very interested in finding out what made people tick.

We were silent while Kelly delivered our drinks. After she'd gone, Charlie said, "So, to recap, Anne-Marie is late twenties, nine years married, and childless. Why would she be such a prude?"

"I don't know," said Brenda. "I was a few years ahead of her in school, so never paid her any attention. She had a couple of older sisters in school, too."

"There were three," I said. "Two ahead of me, and one in the year behind me. The ones ahead of me got pregnant before they finished high school, so they weren't prudes."

"Did anything bad happen to them?" Charlie asked.

I shook my head. "One married the father, gave birth to two more kids, and seems to be living happily ever after. The other one had an abortion and went on to college. As far as I recall, Anne-Marie's parents didn't make a fuss about either event."

"So, what could have made her like that?"

I wondered why Charlie was so interested in Anne-Marie, but then I remembered his sexual orientation—or lack thereof—and realized why he was keen to discover the motives for unusual attitudes.

"Maybe it's her husband," Brenda said. "He's from Vancouver and has no family here. Anne-Marie married him when she was eighteen, so it could be his influence that makes her prudish."

"Have you met him?" I asked.

Before Brenda could answer, Kelly was back to see if we wanted another drink. Naturally, we said yes, and she went off to build them.

Brenda said, "I've met Ted a couple of times, when I ran into the two of them in the grocery store or the mall. He never had anything to say, and I was always in too big a hurry to bother trying to make small talk. Which I don't like anyway."

"Does Ted work here?" Charlie asked.

"No, in Breslow," Brenda replied. "Anne-Marie did tell me that much. But she never talks about him or about their life together. He never comes to office parties. If she has any personal friends or goes anywhere without him, I've never heard about it."

"He drinks, though," I said, and turned to look at their table. "Well, maybe not that much. They've gone." A different couple sat at that table now. I didn't recognize them, so they were probably tourists.

Brenda said, "I'll ask her about Ted on Monday. If I can get a word in edgeways." Her eyes sparkled and her smile was relaxed, so I knew that if she'd been nervous when we walked in, she certainly wasn't now.

Kelly came back with our drinks, and I asked her, "What was Anne-Marie's husband drinking?"

"A virgin Caesar," she said. I'd never seen Ted in the bar before, so maybe he didn't drink alcohol at all. Which led to me wondering why they'd been in the bar tonight. It could have been coincidence, though. Maybe Anne-Marie wanted to celebrate something with a real drink.

We three clinked glasses, toasting each other, then paused to glance around the room, while Kelly collected money from the three bank girls at the next table. They rose, gathering up bags and jackets.

Sheila stopped beside me. "Hey, Brenda, are you going to set up a *ménage à trois*?" She'd had enough to drink that she could barely pronounce the phrase.

Ann, looking horrified, said, "Sheila!" Laura smiled and waited, eyes alight, to see what would happen.

I might have told Sheila to mind her own business, but Brenda just grinned. "Both these guys are good cooks, and they probably know how to run a vacuum cleaner, too, but I like my privacy. So, no, I'm not."

Sheila giggled and patted Brenda on the shoulder. "Well, enjoy whatever you're doing!"

I reversed my opinion on telling Sheila to mind her own business. She was a little drunk and meant Brenda no disrespect.

The three girls hurried off. I watched them go, thinking that one of these days, before they were old enough to retire, I'd have to start calling them women instead of girls. But maybe not. I'd learned long ago that they liked being called girls; it made them feel younger.

Brenda looked at Charlie. "How's the research going on the Tweedsmuir clan? Or is that something you can't talk about?"

I looked at him, too. "You want to know about the Tweedsmuirs?"

"Yes," he said. "I'm drafting a will for Charlotte Tweedsmuir, who just turned ninety, and she has doubts about the morals of some of her offspring. Do you know the family?"

"Not really," I said, "but my grandmother does. She worked for the Tweedsmuirs from the time she was a young girl."

Charlie leaned forward, his expression eager. "Do you think I could talk to her?"

"No," I said. "You couldn't talk to her, because she'd be too busy talking to you. She loves to tell stories about her youth." I pulled a pen out of my jacket pocket and scribbled her name and phone number on my napkin. I handed it to him. "Her name is Dorinda Wilson; she's my father's mother. I'll call and tell her you'll be phoning."

"I appreciate that. That local history in the library hasn't helped much."

Brenda laughed. "Nobody tells the truth in a book like that."

Ward and Gwendolyn got up and began edging past us. Gwendolyn stopped and said to Brenda, "I've been listening to the conversation at this table. I don't know what you've got, dear, but I wish I had some." Her tone was wistful.

"Gwen!" Ward grabbed for her hand and pulled her after him.

Brenda pushed her chair back. "I think I've created enough envy in this room. Let's go have supper in the Blueback Grill and work on whoever is in there. I also need to line my stomach with something if we're going to drink any more."

"I'll pay," I said.

"No, I will," Charlie said.

Brenda held up her hands to stop us. "Listen, guys. I'm paying, and I want everybody to see that I'm paying. That way, the village will quit gossiping about me and switch to the more astonishing news that you two are kept men."

Charlie and I looked at each other, shrugged, and said, more or less in unison, "Whatever!"

Brenda tucked her arms through ours again, as we stood in the restaurant entrance and waited for someone to seat us. She looked at us affectionately. "My boy toys!"

Charlie laughed. "Brenda, my sweet, you've got that phrase backwards. It's 'toy boys'." He looked at me and winked. "Have you noticed she's been treating us as sexual objects all night?"

"I noticed," I said. "I don't mind. I'll lie down for her any time."

"Me, too," Charlie said. "But I think she might have had too much to drink. What do you say we take her down to the bay and dump her in?"

Brenda removed her arms from ours and tried to look stern. "Cut it out, guys! I'm the princess around here. And don't forget I'm paying for dinner!"

Chapter 9 Brenda on trial

I headed for work Monday morning, lighthearted and in love with the world, despite heavy rain pouring from the sky. It had been a superb weekend. On Friday night, Charlie, Larry, and I had given Deception Bay something to talk about. Saturday night, Charlie and I had dinner, including my favorite chocolate cheesecake, at Maxima and, on Sunday night, Larry and I pigged out on pasta at the new Italian restaurant in Breslow. My wonderful toy boys had both made me laugh a lot.

Sunday afternoon's archery class at Toby's had been remarkable, too, in that I'd finally gotten an arrow to hit the bull's-eye. Toby said I'd learned to assume the correct stance, but since I hadn't realized this myself, I thought it was just an accident. However, she insisted on pouring champagne to celebrate this momentous occasion and all the Amazons hugged me. Midge offered to make a bow out of yew wood for me, based on the antique longbow in Toby's store, as she had done for her own use. That was flattering, but I said I'd wait until I could hit the bull's-eye three times in a row before I traded in my sleek, modern commercial bow for one that looked like an antique.

As I drove the few blocks to the office, I replayed one of the Amazon conversations in my mind. I'd picked up Gina at her house, since her father had gone somewhere in his van, and told her the three-way date Friday night had been a lot of fun. "I don't think your mother would have approved, though. She'd likely scold me for playing games."

"Maybe," Gina said. "But she'd assume you were trying to make them both jealous enough to propose. You know Luisa; she's a real Italian mama."

"I know. I'm supposed to snare a husband and have half a dozen bambinos, right?"

Gina nodded. "Are you going to marry one of them?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"As I've said before, marriage doesn't suit me and I'm not going to try it again."

"Not even if you're in love?"

"Not even then, Gina. Anyway, I'm not in love with either of them. I do love them both, but not in a romantic way. They're my friends, buddies that I enjoy spending time with."

She was quiet for a couple of minutes. "I had coffee with Charlie, you know. And he said he'd like to do that again."

"Are you going to?"

"Would you mind, Brenda?"

"No, of course not. I don't own him. I told you; we're just friends." I could see out of the corner of my eye that she was looking at me doubtfully.

"But you act like lovers sometimes. I've seen you."

I sighed. "When we do that, we're putting on an act. I seem to have this desire to provide Deception Bay with plenty of material for gossip. And Charlie loves a joke."

We fell silent again, until I realized what she really wanted to know. "Charlie is a super nice guy, Gina. A gentleman. You would never have to worry about getting into a car with him."

"Thanks."

As I parked behind the office, I began to wonder what Charlie's next move would be. Maybe we'd make a date to walk into The Maggie as a foursome. I was still smiling about the new gossip and speculation that would cause as I entered the reception area.

Anne-Marie was not behind her desk. Paul's office door was closed. This seemed unusual but maybe he was dictating a letter for her to type. He wasn't generally so secretive about dictating letters, though. I shrugged, put my umbrella in the white metal mesh stand, and headed for my own office.

I'd only taken two steps when Anne-Marie came out of Paul's office, crying. He was right behind her.

"Brenda," Paul said, "will you try and talk some sense into this woman? She says she's quitting."

I was stunned. "Quitting? Anne-Marie?" It sounded impossible; she'd been our secretary forever.

Paul gave me a stern look over the top of his rimless half glasses. "Yes. And from what I could gather, which wasn't much, it's all your fault. Some joke you played, or something like that. None of it made any sense to me. And I want you to fix it. Anne-Marie is the best secretary I've ever had."

She was mopping her face with a tissue and looked like she might erupt into tears again at one wrong word. "Anne-Marie," I said, "if I've upset you, I'm sorry. But I think I have a right to know what I did to offend you."

She gulped a couple of times but finally got one word out. "Okay."

"Come into my office so we can be private." I looked at Paul. "You'll be able to keep an eye on reception for a little while?"

He didn't look happy, but he nodded, and I led Anne-Marie into my cubbyhole.

When we were both seated, I said, "Anne-Marie, you are incredibly efficient and good at your job, and we all appreciate it. And, believe me, nobody here wants to lose you. Why are you so upset?"

"Friday night. You and those two men. You were actually showing off your sinfulness to the whole world." She gulped again. "I don't want to work with someone who has no morals."

I refrained from saying that The Maggie was not the whole world. And I certainly wasn't a sinner in my own eyes, so what was her problem? I said, "It's nobody's business but mine whether I have one boyfriend or two, or three, or a dozen. The people in this town love to gossip and the guys and I decided to give them something to gossip about. It was kind of a joke, that's all. I'm sure most people took it that way."

"It's an awful sin to sleep with more than one man," she insisted, blinking at me. Black mascara was smeared on her cheeks.

"And what makes you think I'm sleeping with both of them? You're making accusations without having any proof to back them up."

Her eyes went wide. "But you must be!"

"You're only saying that because someone saw me kissing Larry and because I've been known to go out to dinner with Charlie."

Anne-Marie seemed to struggle for words. "Well, it's what people do. It's what everybody does."

I had no intention of telling her whether I did or did not sleep with either or both men. My business. Not hers. Not anybody's business except for the two men's and mine. I turned and opened the blind on my window to let in some light, even if it was muted by the water falling out of the sky. When I turned back, the brighter light caught a blotch of purple on her jaw, under heavy makeup.

"There's something more going on here than just your opinion," I said. "Who hit you? And why?" It was no more my business where she'd gotten that bruise than it was her business who I had sex with, but somebody was obviously bullying her. If she needed help, I had to know who was responsible, so I could do something about it.

Anne-Marie started to cry again. I pushed my box of tissues across the desk to her.

After a few moments, she pulled herself together, but when she looked at me, her eyes were still brimming. She blinked, took a couple of deep breaths, and muttered, "I love this job. But he says I can't work here anymore."

"Are you talking about your husband?"

She nearly lost control again, but nodded.

"I thought it must be," I said gently. "I know your family and I can't believe that any of them hit you because of something somebody else did. I've said hello to Ted only a couple of times and I know nothing about him."

"He belongs to a strict religion," she whispered.

I sighed, wondering if I should have guessed. "One of those religions which believes it has the right to tell the whole world how to live?"

She blinked, hesitated, then nodded.

"You're saying it's his opinion that I'm evil, rather than yours."

"Well, but he says..."

I interrupted her. "I'm not interested in what he says. Ted doesn't know me. He doesn't work here. You may think I'm being far too liberal, but as far as I'm concerned, he has no right to tell other people what to do or what to think."

Tears were sliding down her cheeks again, spreading the mascara even further. "But he says he'll leave me if I don't obey him."

I couldn't imagine that being a loss, if what she said about him was right, but what did I know? "Anne-Marie, I understand that you're in a real bind but it's up to you to decide what to do. I can sympathize, but I can't advise you, except to suggest you go to a professional counselor."

The silence felt long, but probably only lasted one or two minutes. Then Anne-Marie rose. "I'm going home," she said, "and try to get my head straight."

I didn't think going home to her husband would help. She must have read my mind because she stopped in the doorway and said, "Oh, I'm going to Mom's. She doesn't know about Ted's religion either. I guess it's time she did."

I watched her slip into her raincoat and go out the front door. It occurred to me then that she might get some benefit from joining the Amazon Club. But not until she stopped believing that her husband had all the answers. She'd married him right out of high school; it would take some time for her to find out who she was, and to learn how to make her own decisions.

Paul came and stood in my doorway, his expression one big question mark.

"I don't know what she's going to decide," I said. "There's a chance now that she'll change her mind, but it may take a couple of days."

He exhaled a long sigh. "But what are we going to do without our secretary?"

First it had been "his" secretary. Now it was "ours." I had no trouble predicting what would come next.

"Maybe you could fill in for a day or two," Paul said. Unfortunately, he knew I could type.

"Maybe you could hire a temp. I've never done work like Anne-Marie's."

"But we'd need Anne-Marie to train a temp."

My turn for a long sigh. "All right, two days. That's it. And you'll have to do your letters in longhand because I don't take dictation. Also, if one of my clients wants me, you're on your own. Okay?"

He accepted defeat, though it sure didn't look like defeat to me. "Okay."



The next afternoon, Toby called me. "We're going to do the Taupolia in my studio. Even if the sun comes out later, it'll be soaking wet out in Midge's field." She paused. "Besides, if we meet at her farm, somebody might see us and decide to investigate. The studio is truly private."

"I think that's the better idea. People are always adding two and two and getting some outlandish answer, like eleven. And expressing their thoughts on the matter to anyone who will listen."

"And the trouble is," Toby said, "our Amazon rituals would appear more than just outlandish to most people. By the way, I heard about Friday night. Good for you!"

"That caper produced one unhappy result," I said, "but it may turn out to be the best thing that could have happened. I won't find out for a while." I hoped Anne-Marie would make a decision soon. Tomorrow would be wonderful. She enjoyed her job, but I certainly didn't.

"One last thing," Toby said. "Since this is a special occasion, we'll offer food at the altar as well as wine."

"What should I bring?"

"It doesn't matter," she said. "Something everyone might like. The point is to offer food acceptable to the goddess, but once it's been offered and the ceremony is over, we'll get to eat it. That's traditional."

After she hung up, I tried to decide. Sweet or savory? Something with cheese in it or something smothered in chocolate? Well, four thousand years ago, Artemis had probably eaten honey cake, but I was sure she'd never met a chocolate brownie.

I drove home, fed DeeCee and myself a piece of halibut, with fried mushrooms for me, and headed for Toby's. My tongue full of anticipation, I picked up a dozen brownies from the bakery on my way.

It was almost dark as I walked along the path past the house. The arbutus leaves were now soggy underfoot and a couple of raindrops slid off those still on the tree and managed to hit the bullseye of my bare neck. I hoped the Taupolia was not going to be as shocking as those cold drops slithering down my warm back.

In the foyer, I made sure my silver bow and arrow brooch was straight on my monk's robe before going into the main room. I put the chocolate brownies on a small table just inside the door, where other cartons and bags awaited the big ritual. As I'd guessed, because of the number of cars parked along Toby's driveway, everyone else had already arrived.

Toby finished lighting the seven red candles in the candelabra and poured a thimbleful of red wine into the goblets while the rest of us stood in silence, waiting for whatever was slated to happen next. It had evidently been Midge's turn to choose wine and candles. She preferred red to Toby's white, as I did, but the red wine did look rather too much like blood for comfort, especially in the flickering candlelight.

Toby, taking her usual role as priestess in her white silk gown, picked up a goblet and gestured to indicate we should follow her lead. She walked slowly to the altar, poured her wine into it, and intoned, "Artemis, virgin huntress, goddess of the moon, we salute you." This was

how meetings usually began and the rest of us repeated her actions, then followed her back to the table and sat down. Nobody said a word. The absence of greetings and casual chit-chat indicated that we were all wondering, and perhaps all a little nervous, about what would happen next.

"I decided," Toby said, "that we should have our discussion before the Tauropolia. Perhaps what is said will make the ceremony more significant." She didn't wait for any comments. "Who had time to read Mary Beard or Laurie Penny?"

Donna was the first to respond. "I read Penny's *Bitch Doctrine* and got a lot out of it. She says feminism isn't about fighting men all the time, and she's right." She pulled a notebook from the pocket of her robe and leaned toward the circle of candlelight in the center of the table.

"Here's what Penny wrote. 'But feminism does threaten the status quo, which is that men have more social power than women. Feminism is about fairness, about changing the old order whereby men have had most of the power for most of human history.'"

"I agree," Kitty said. "I don't hate men or want to fight with them, but I do hate how human culture has evolved with men being respected, but not women. I guess patriarchy is a global thing."

"Of course it's global," Donna replied. "It must be very handy and satisfying for men to have women to look down on and control, to treat like slaves. It's no wonder they fight against changing the status quo."

"Not all men do that," I said, thinking of Larry and Charlie and my equal relationships with both of them.

"Of course, not all men," Toby said, "but enough of them. Too many."

Including my own father, Gavin, who had obviously enjoyed exercising his power over me when I was too young and too small to fight back. It was true that we still had a long way to go before all men considered us as equals. Maybe they never would. I pushed that thought away as too depressing.

Midge seemed to read my mind. "We've come a long way, but the media still reinforces the old culture. It's still girl children who are taught to prepare for marriage, and boy children who are taught to aim for careers. So, in order to please men and avoid being 'left on the shelf,' we're supposed to pretend to be less intelligent and far less capable than we are. We're supposed to give up a lot of our power so that we can have a man to look after us."

"But not all parents are like that," I said, trying to maintain some sort of balance.

Toby ignored my comment. "Manufacturing exploits that old-fashioned culture, too. Look at Barbie dolls, look at the thousands of beauty aids available. It's all designed to make women think that being pretty enough to attract men is the most important thing in their lives."

"But there's some biological basis for that," I said, deciding to play devil's advocate. "Women want to have children and they want to have the best fathers for those children. The prettier they are, the more choices they'll have."

Toby had notes, too, lying on the table in front of her. "Penny writes, 'We want much more than to be told we're pretty. We want power and we want respect. We want control over our bodies and ownership over our desires. We want to be valued as human beings, whatever we look like, whatever we do for a living. We want the same basic rights to autonomy and agency that men have always enjoyed. And that's just for starters.'"

"Wow!" Phyllis exclaimed. "That is such a fantastic statement! I can see where I'm going to have to buy and read that book. I'm trying to teach my daughters that strength and character are more important than beauty and always will be. They need to know that even if girls aren't thin and pretty, they're valuable human beings and worthy of respect."

Midge nodded. "Men always seem to believe they're worthy of respect, no matter what they look like and, in some cases, no matter what they do. But we're human; why shouldn't we be respected, too?"

Toby responded with a bitter remark. "Because a lot of them truly don't believe we're really human. Have you noticed that most of them, even the good ones, loathe the idea of being like women because they believe women are inferior? To many, we're breeding stock and servants."

Donna still had her notebook out. "I've been reading Ursula LeGuin. She's known for her science fiction, but her grasp of human politics is good, too. She said that almost all our laws and codes were made by men, for men. Until only a few generations ago, women had no voice, no vote. The men made all the choices."

"That's still true in many places," I said.

"The point is," Donna said, "that where male ethics differs most radically from what women feel to be right and wrong is the area of sexuality, conception, pregnancy, childbirth, and also responsibility for children. LeGuin thought most of men's rules in this area are not just irrelevant, but disastrous."

Silence reigned for several seconds, and the room seemed darker than it probably was. The curtains on the tall windows were open, but no light came through the glass. The night was pitch black.

Then Kitty giggled, and it felt like a cloud had lifted. She said, "I like when Penny asks what would happen if men got pregnant. Wouldn't that be funny? Especially with somebody like my husband. He thinks having the flu is major pain; I don't know what he'd do if he had to go through nine months of pregnancy and then childbirth!"

"Yeah!" Phyllis was laughing now, too. "Mine would regard the whole process as a heroic act of sacrifice. And believe you me, abortion would be free on demand and available everywhere!"

Toby's face had relaxed. "Here's a side issue relating to marriage and relationships between men and women. One of the problems with marriage, as it's been practiced in just the last hundred years or so, is the assumption that your partner is supposed to take care of your every need. We all have different needs at different times. Expecting one person to meet them all is not just unrealistic, it's unreasonable."

She turned her head to look at me and I got a sudden premonition that I was about to be put on the spot. Surely she wouldn't do that to a fellow Amazon.

But the woman had no mercy. "Brenda, the book suggests that polyamory might be the solution to women's needs. You've had some experience with this. What do you say?"

I didn't say what I wanted to say, which was that she should mind her own business, the statement emphasized with descriptive four-letter words. After all, I'd been the one to go public with having two boyfriends. I took a deep breath and faced up to the task of sharing.

"I've been dating two guys for only the last couple of weeks, so my experience is limited."

"Come on, Brenda, give us the lowdown," said Kitty. "You're doing way better than the rest of us have even dreamed of doing, I'm sure."

I didn't swear at her; she gave me a massage every month and I could imagine how brutal that experience might be if she decided to cut loose with those powerful fingers. So, they'd all heard about my exploits. Well, of course they had. That's why the boys and I had picked Friday night at The Maggie.

"Yeah, Brenda," Phyllis said. "Are you getting all your needs met?"

I had to be careful what I said so as not to even hint at Charlie's secret. They probably all thought, as Anne-Marie did, that I was having sex with both men. "Well, Larry grew up here, the same as me, and since we know everybody, we love to talk about what's happening with the village and everybody in it. On the other hand, Charlie is an outsider and interested in many things, so he and I talk about the wider world."

"So, you're getting sex and companionship," Donna said. "What about your other needs, though?"

That question stumped me for a second. "Affection is a need and they both care about me. But they're not the only people who care about me, so I don't actually need them for that, though I like it a lot." I paused again. "I can't think of anything else. Maybe my needs aren't all that great."

Toby looked pleased. "So perhaps Brenda respects herself and feels content with herself and would go on feeling like a complete human being even if she had no boyfriends." She leaned back in her chair, leaving her face partly shadowed. "Here in the village, some people believe it's a big deal having two boyfriends, but attitudes in cities are different. There, you can get lost in the crowd; you can play the field without answering to anyone."

"But that would be different if you wanted to get married, right? You'd pick one and be faithful to him." There was more of her Italian mama in Gina than I had suspected.

"Why?" I asked.

She looked surprised. "Because that's what the man would expect."

"I'm sure he would," I said, "but what about my expectations? My desires? I might want to continue with polyamory."

Gina was quiet for a minute. "I guess that's what we're talking about, isn't it? That our expectations should get the same respect that men's do." She stared at me across the table, her expression revealing that she was still troubled. "But how would you feel if your husband dated other women?"

"If we'd agreed to it being a possibility before we married, then I think it would be fine. I'm only guessing about that, though; I don't know, and I don't plan to find out. Marriage is no longer in the cards for me."

"At one time marriage would have been essential," Midge said. "Women had no other option."

"Which was how men wanted it," Toby said. "Those men who feel they should be in charge of the world want control over who breeds and how, and that requires making women subservient. Penny says every society in the world does this to some extent, which means that women's right to control what happens to their bodies is a subject of public debate among powerful men."

"Among men," Midge repeated. "Debated by men, and voted on by men, not by the women they are trying to control."

There was silence, while we thought about that. But not all of us were thinking such serious thoughts.

Phyllis said, "Brenda, do you need a lot of sex? Is that why you have two boyfriends?"

I couldn't help myself. "It's none of your fucking business!"

For the next five seconds, it felt like the others were holding their breath.

"What you mean," said Donna, with a grin, "is that your fucking is none of our business."

The held breath erupted in great shouts of laughter, including mine.

"Yes," I said, relieved that the moment had passed. "Yes, that's what I meant."

"Have we covered everything we want to?" Toby asked. She looked a trifle uncomfortable. "Does anyone have anything else to say?"

"I do." Gina took a long breath. "I want to say what I think about Laurie Penny's attitude to rape."

"Go ahead," Toby said, her tone gentle. It always was with Gina.

Toby had never married, so she said, and I assumed she'd never had children. Were her unfulfilled maternal instincts focused on this young woman who was probably twenty years her junior?

Gina said, "Penny wrote that our culture refuses to accept that most rapes are committed by ordinary men, guys who have friends and families, that we might see every day. We prefer to imagine rapists as evil men with knives, men who hide in dark alleys."

"That's because it's so horrible to think that the apparently nice men in our lives have raped someone," Midge said. "It's easier to believe that only evil men rape."

"But it's true," Gina said. "The five men who raped me are all ordinary men. Nobody would ever think of them as capable of rape. None of them are related to me, either, and Penny says it's often fathers and husbands and uncles who rape."

Gina had come a long way in a few months. She was uncomfortable talking about the rape, yet had learned to trust these women enough to be able to speak about her experience. It was good to know they'd given her strength, reinforced her value as a human.

Toby said, "Rape is an act of power and control rather than sexual attraction. That's what it was in my case, when my father raped me. And went on raping me, for four long years."

The silence was longer this time. I guessed we were all thinking of how horrible that would have been, the constant fear and revulsion.

Toby seemed to know what we were thinking. "I wanted to kill him," she said, "but I also wanted to live free, not in prison. So, my anger came out in other ways, like with my house."

"I know," Midge said. "At the time I thought you were a little crazy, maybe OCD. But I'd never been raped, and I didn't have much understanding, then, about what that could do to a woman."

"Will you tell us about your house?" Kitty asked.

"Yes, of course," Toby said. "The house was built in the 1920s by my great grandparents." She waved her hand toward the big house that sat between the drive and the studio where we sat. "My mother lived in this house as a child, but never as a married woman, because her parents didn't like or trust the man she married, my father. When they died, they left all their property to me."

"I bet your father didn't like that!" Phyllis said.

"He was furious," Toby said, "and my mother was disappointed. She always loved this place. But my father made plenty of money on his own, so she never went without anything, except for this property."

"If he never lived here," Gina said, "why was the house a problem?"

"He'd stayed in it for brief visits," Toby replied, "and when it became mine, all I could think of was to get rid of everything he'd touched. I had the place cleaned, painted, refloored, and redecorated, and supervised it myself. I sent the furniture from the entire first floor, as well as the second-floor bedroom and bathroom he'd used, to the dump and bought antiques to replace it."

"I understand that completely," Gina said. "I would have done the same."

Toby nodded at her. "Once the cleansing was done, I walked through the whole house, touching the walls and the furniture, happy in the knowledge that every inch of it was all mine. Maybe I couldn't bring myself to kill him, but I erased him in the only way I knew how."

Her words gave me the shivers and made me think about my own father. Would Gavin have gone that far with me? Had he been satisfied with just slapping me around or would he have raped me if he thought he could get away with it? Midge was right; I didn't want to even think about how ugly and shattering and wounding that would have been.

Toby pushed her chair back and rose to stand behind it. "Misogyny still exists. And it is still the fear that women might gain control of their bodies and actually get to make their own decisions about the future of the human race. Or to make decisions about anything, I suppose." She paused for breath. "Misandry also exists, because of male brutality. Can we ever resolve these hatreds?"

"That question has been around a long time," Kitty said. "But it's usually phrased as, 'you can't live with 'em, and you can't live without 'em'."

I knew Kitty was trying to lighten the atmosphere, but her words jarred on me.

Perhaps they jarred on Toby, too. "All too true." Her hands gripped the back of her chair. "I want to do the Tauropolia now. I'm sorry we can't drink and dance and celebrate all night the way it would have happened three or four thousand years ago, but something is always lost when other things are gained."

Toby turned and pointed at the altar. "I'll do the speaking. I'd like the rest of you to stand in a semi-circle behind me, each holding a candle, which is a substitute for a torch, and also your offering for the goddess."

It took a few minutes for us to organize ourselves into the semi-circle. Candle flames sputtered and flared in the air currents that spun around us, spreading a little warm, flickering light as Toby positioned herself before the altar.

Her words slow and rhythmic, she intoned, "We come before you in worship and supplication, Artemis Tauropolis, virgin goddess, horse-tamer, tree divinity, huntress, mistress of destruction. We make this sacrifice in hopes that you will release your shafts of doom against those who would oppress us and deny our own small measure of divinity."

Toby picked up Rondo, her black Himalayan cat, from his nest in the easy chair beside the altar. Rondo's big yellow eyes blinked in surprise as she placed him on the altar and held him there. She pulled a hunting knife from that same chair.

I heard a gasp from Gina, standing beside me. The candlelight no longer felt friendly and warm.

Toby touched Rondo's throat with the flat side of the blade. "We offer this blood sacrifice to you, Goddess, in your honor, and as a sign of our dedication."

Rondo kicked out with his hind legs and meowed loudly in protest. Toby put him gently on the floor and he marched off, tail waving furiously, ears laid back.

Toby held the knife before her, point up, over the altar. "Goddess, we ask your help in our need."

She turned to face the rest of us. "That was a symbolic sacrifice. Just as it was in ancient Greece, when the women pretended to kill a man. But my plea to the goddess was not to kill men. My plea was to kill men's power over women."

Chapter 10 Larry's secret

I went to work on Thursday at three in the afternoon, in a frenzy of anticipation because Elizabeth had said she'd be back from wherever she'd gone, and I was dying to know whether she intended to sell the property. To my disappointment, she wasn't in the hotel and both Sam and George said she had not been there at all. Of course, Ward and Gwendolyn Best had come in a couple of times, looking for her, demanding answers, and driving everybody nuts.

Deflated, I got the bookkeeping done, literally up to the minute, and even dusted Elizabeth's desk. She hadn't, apparently, given anybody an itinerary, so I'd only been assuming that she'd be back to work on the date she'd given me.

I thought of all kinds of reasons, most of them illogical, as to why she hadn't shown up yet. The most likely was that she was still travelling and wouldn't get back to Deception Bay until evening. Making another assumption, I hurried over to the Georgia mall and bought a bouquet of flowers—those big fluffy ones, dahlias—for her desk so they'd be there to welcome her in the morning. Maybe even sooner. Maybe she'd phone as soon as she was home.

But, by 10:00 p.m., when Brenda came in, Elizabeth still hadn't phoned. At home, I'd have been pacing. At the bar, I was delivering trays of drinks, which amounted to the same thing, but at least I got paid for it. Thursday night tended to be a warm-up for the Friday night free-for-all, and I was glad to be busy. Brenda came straight to the bar and perched on her favorite stool, with her back against the wall.

I handed her a gin and tonic. She looked at it, and then back at me with a surprised expression. "No lemon slices? No lemons?"

"Oh, shit! I'm sorry, Brenda! Elizabeth hasn't come back yet, and I don't know whether to celebrate or slit my wrists." I added three lemon slices to her glass.

"Please don't slit your wrists," Brenda said, with a sympathetic look. "Celebrating would be lots more fun and a lot less painful."

She always seemed calm on those rare times I saw her after a karate class. I'd asked her about it once and she told me that, because she focused on the practice so intensely, karate was like a meditation.

"I've been waiting patiently," I said, leaning on the bar. "I've managed not to worry about losing my job for weeks now. At least, I wasn't conscious of worrying, but I must have been subconsciously, because the worry is boiling over and spilling into everything. Elizabeth was supposed to be back today, and she isn't."

"Maybe she's sleeping off jet lag. Where did she go?"

"Nobody knows."

Brenda frowned. "I don't believe that. She must have told somebody how to reach her. I mean, what if the hotel had burned down? Or a tsunami hit the bay?"

"You're right." I thought about that while I renewed the drinks on one of the window tables. When I came back, I said, "I just remembered she has a cousin living in Breslow. Met her once. A tall, skinny, old lady who used to teach high school. She looked grumpy."

"What's her name?"

I struggled with my memory cells. "Helena. Helena Hamilton."

"Well, you could phone her tomorrow, if Elizabeth still hasn't arrived."

"Or I could make life simple and phone Elizabeth at home." Another fact clicked into place. "Ken and Lucy Garth must be looking after Bernie and they'd know if Elizabeth is back. Unless she took him with her. But, if she did, the Garths might be on holiday, too."

"Bernie?"

"Her dog."

"I don't think you ever told me about her having a dog."

Unable to keep still, I polished a couple of glasses. "I thought you'd have met Bernie. She never goes anywhere without him. Well, she doesn't take him to the bank. And he wouldn't be allowed in the grocery store."

"Larry, get a grip! You're actually babbling," said Brenda. "I've never heard you do that before. And, no, I haven't met Bernie. In fact, I've never met Elizabeth. Oh, I've seen her several times, so I know who she is. I know where she lives." She paused. "Remember, the population of this village is now more than three thousand people, so I can't know all of them, even if it sometimes feels like they all know me."

When I came back from another beer delivery, I said, "I've been thinking about Elizabeth's situation. She's got no kids, no nieces and nephews. What happens to the hotel if she gets killed in a plane crash? Who would she have left it to? She's too smart not to have a will."

"Maybe Helena is her heir."

"That could be," I said, "though it's a standing joke with George and me that she's going to leave everything to a home for dogs, since she's been breeding them for years and years."

"What kind of dog? Labradoodle? Shepherd? Or something cute and fluffy and yappy, like a cockapoo, that rides around in mommy's arms?"

I couldn't help laughing. "If you'd ever met Bernie, you'd never forget him. He's a Leonberger."

Brenda raised her eyebrows. "What on earth is a Leonberger? Sounds as if he might be edible."

"He might be. I wonder what dog tastes like."

"Larry!"

"Sorry. He's a Newfoundland and Saint Bernard cross, with a little Great Pyrenees added in. George and I have agreed that there's some musk ox in there, too. He weighs nearly as much as I do."

"Wow! Not exactly cute and fluffy then."

"No, more like a small elephant with thick fur. Lion-colored all over, except for his black face."

"Do you like him?"

I nodded. "I do. A lot. I've been so worried about my stupid job, I never thought about him." I glanced around the room, but the customers seemed content. "Elizabeth trained Bernie to regard George and me as part of her family, so that we could look after him when she was doing errands. This breed isn't too keen on strangers."

"Could I meet him sometime? Seriously. I like dogs. Or would he want to eat me?"

"Only if you were attacking me." Brenda's calm presence was beginning to ease my twitchiness, and I was able to grin at her. "Probably not a good idea for me to bring him over when we have a date."

Brenda threw a chewed-up lemon slice at me. "I'll remind you about Bernie some other time. I could take you both to lunch or something."

"I like food. But Bernie likes to run along the beach."

"I'll think of something," she said. "In the meantime, I have gossip."

"Great! I haven't seen you since Monday night." I reached across the bar and ran my fingers gently up her forearm. "And I've missed you."

She gave me a look that, in a romance novel, would no doubt have been called smoldering. Then she got down to business. "Remember I told you about Anne-Marie quitting?"

I nodded.

"Well, she came back yesterday morning."

"Not quitting after all?"

"No," Brenda said. "She left her husband and moved back in with her parents. And she's filing for a divorce."

"That was quick!"

"Maybe not." Brenda's face was serious. "I suspect she'd been unhappy with Ted for a long time, and didn't want to admit it, even to herself. Our caper on Friday night just brought the situation to a head. We acted as a catalyst."

"Are you glad she's back?"

Brenda's smile was rueful. "Paul and Ross are very happy; their worlds are all neat and tidy again. I have to admit I'm glad she's back because I hate office work."

"But? I can definitely hear a 'but'."

"You know me too well. I'm glad she's back and I told her so, but it was hard to keep feeling benevolent and relieved while she was giving me shit for my lousy typing, my rotten filing skills, and my inability to deal with the coffeemaker. She said I nearly broke it."

"Maybe her husband got her into the habit of being critical."

Brenda shrugged. "Could be. But she'd better get out of the habit, or I'll give in to my primal urges and bite her." Her face brightened. "I know! I'll borrow Bernie, take him to the office, and get him to sit on her." She smiled in satisfaction. "That'll mess up her perfect hair."

Brenda was exaggerating, of course. Sometimes she couldn't resist making a good story just a little bit better, though I usually caught on when she did that. "Well, I'm glad the Anne-Marie thing has worked out for the best. Tell me about the Taupolia. That was Tuesday night, right? I kind of expected to see you here later."

"I intended to come for a nightcap, yes." She handed me her glass for a refill. "But I felt a little shaken up by the experience and I wanted to think my way through that before I talked about it."

"We could have talked through it together."

She squeezed my hand. "I knew that. You're a good psychiatrist. But I'm a big girl now. I wanted to get my head sorted out before I talked."

"So talk. Oops, wait a minute! Duty calls." I had to refresh drinks at three tables and clear two, so nearly ten minutes had passed before I had the time to concentrate on what she was saying.

Brenda gave me an outline of the feminist discussion. "That went really well. The book we'd read turned out to be excellent and Gina was brave enough to make some comments about the gang-rape she experienced. I think the club has helped her a lot."

"Have you got the book? Can I borrow it?"

She nodded. "Of course. I don't believe you need it, but it gives clear and cogent reasons for why feminism is still necessary."

"I may not need it for myself, but I'm interested." I smiled. "It'll give me more training for my career as an amateur shrink. So, if that part was good, what bothered you? The ritual?"

"Yes. I found it a little spooky, and I'm still not sure why. It was basically Toby saying things to the goddess, Artemis, and it didn't last long, probably not more than two minutes. Then we put our offerings on the altar and Toby said a few more words. Then, we put our candles back on the table, drank more wine, and ate the food we brought as offerings."

"Doesn't sound spooky at all to me. Was it just the atmosphere?"

"I don't think so. But wait!" She put her glass down with a thump. "It wasn't the ritual as Toby did it that bothered me. It was her description, a couple of weeks before, of how that ritual had been celebrated thousands of years ago. So, when she was standing at the altar on Tuesday night, I had this picture in my mind of a lot of frenzied women dancing and screaming, and the man who was being sacrificed getting his throat cut, and lots of blood everywhere. The only way I can describe it, is that it felt like that's where Toby had gone in her mind."

"So, you felt far away from Deception Bay and your normal life."

"I felt that she was back in those ancient times and that I was being drawn into it." Brenda stared into her drink for a moment. "I wonder if the ceremony was a bit like acting for her. Actors get deep into their scenes and characters. And then they get out again. Though I don't think it always goes that smoothly."

"That comes with practice, I guess. Supposedly, they become the character when on stage, and as soon as they step off, they're back into their own skins. But, when they're in character and they're good actors, they carry the audience with them."

Brenda nodded, looking happier. "I think that's it. I had the feeling that Toby was literally the priestess of Artemis when she was doing that ritual. So much so that she convinced me."

"And when you went back to the table to eat and drink, she was back to the everyday Toby Anderson, the woman we know as the cool, controlled, unemotional owner of an antique store and more wealth than she can ever spend."

"Or so we believe," Brenda said. "Yes, I think you've got it."

Our conversation hit another lull while I filled more drink orders. When I was finished, I said, "I have gossip, too."

"Oh, good!" She leaned forward.

"About us. Charlie and you and me."

"Oh." She looked worried. "Your tone tells me it wasn't fun."

"Kind of ugly, in fact," I said. "Danny Milne was in here last night, drinking with his cousins, Trevor and Reg. When I delivered their drinks, Danny said, 'I hear you turned into some kinda pussy.' They all sneered when he said that."

"I suppose they think you should have beaten up on Charlie. Or me."

"That was the general idea. Trevor swore he'd never allow another man to share his woman and I said you weren't my property, and you weren't Charlie's property either. Then he said feminism had gone way too far and if I were a real man, I'd put a stop to you acting like a whore."

"Whoa!" Brenda took a sip of her drink and sighed. "Well, there are still guys like that around. Macho types who believe they own not only the world but also the women they take to bed. To them, we're like cattle, just here to be owned and used and knocked around if necessary. It's a good thing there don't seem to be a lot of them here."

"I nearly took a swing at him for calling you a whore, but caught myself in time."

"That's good. I wouldn't like it if you lost your job over me."

"Right at that moment, I wasn't thinking about the job. I stopped because I knew violence wouldn't change their minds."

"You could have been hurt, too."

"It could have been the other way around." I grinned at her. "You don't know everything about me."

Her eyes widened. "You mean you could have taken all three of them?"

"Um, maybe. Maybe not. You may think I'm mild-mannered Clark Kent, but under this shirt is a chest three feet wide with a big red S on it."

"Go on!"

"I'm serious. I got beaten up a few times when I was about twelve and my father decided I'd better learn to defend myself. He didn't like violence, any more than I do, but he said self-defense was a good way of stopping violence. And a way of not getting hurt, of course. He never told anybody outside the family what we were doing and neither did I, but he started training me as a boxer. After he got killed, I went to Breslow for private training. And went all out for it in Vancouver, when I was going to college."

Brenda's eyes were still wide. "I never took you to be athletic. And certainly not a fighter."

"I'm not, really. Just stubborn. And I keep up with my training." I held up my fists. "These are capable of killing, you know. They're my ace in the hole."

She stared at my hands, then at me. "Well, you are full of surprises."

"Our secret?"

She grinned. "Oh, absolutely. Deception Bay's secret weapon. That means we're both secret weapons. A lot of women know I do karate, but I don't think any men do. Except my ex-husband. And I only scared him; I didn't break anything."

I was glad the mood had lightened. "I was hoping you'd come in last night, but it's as well that you didn't. Those three yahoos were in the mood to be assholes."

She shrugged. "I was doing my own mild-mannered things last night. Bridge class and then a game of darts with Wilf Lansdowne. He had a problem he needed to get off his chest."

That made me laugh. "So, we're both shrinks as well as secret weapons! I'm beginning to think you and I have as many secrets as the rest of the world."



I'd planned to take the next night off but couldn't because Kelly was writing an exam. In a way, I was glad to be working because the time went faster than it would have if I'd been sitting or pacing at home. The suspense was driving me crazy, and I even went in to the hotel early. I wanted to know my fate as soon as possible.

But Sam said Elizabeth had not appeared at the hotel.

Where the hell was she? Maybe she hadn't come back at all. Maybe the plane had fallen out of the sky. Or the train had crashed. Or the ship had sunk. How could I find out when I didn't know where or how she'd gone on her holiday?

I knew George wouldn't have any answers, but I asked anyway.

He shrugged. "Maybe she met some guy and eloped."

"Oh, come on, George! That's not Elizabeth."

"So phone her house."

I went into her office, sat down, and phoned, hoping there'd be an answer, yet afraid that if there was one, she'd yell at me for disturbing her.

"Just go on taking care of things, Larry." Elizabeth's voice was hoarse, and she seemed barely able to croak out her words. "Damned airplanes are always full of germs," she growled. "I've got flu or something like it."

"Will do," I said. I desperately wanted to ask her if she'd made a decision about whether to sell the hotel, but this obviously wasn't the time.

She hung up and I slumped back in her chair. So. She had flu. It might be another ten days before she felt well enough to come in. Another ten days before I had an answer. Several appropriate phrases went through my mind, but I knew saying them aloud wouldn't speed up Elizabeth's recovery. I said them anyway. It felt good. Then I kicked the leg of her innocent desk and that felt good, too.

I took over from George at five, as usual, and was not happy to see Ward and Gwendolyn Best sitting at their usual window table. I asked George what they were drinking.

"Bahama Mamas," he said. "Both of them."

I reached for the recipe book and George handed it to me, already open at the right page.

"Thanks," I said. "I've never made one of those."

George put on his raincoat. "They bitched because I didn't serve the drinks in a coconut. Apparently, that's how they do it in the Bahamas."

"Did you tell them this is not the Bahamas?"

"Do you think anybody has ever been able to tell Ward Best anything?"

It felt good to laugh. "Well, I will have the pleasure of telling him that Elizabeth is home but has the flu and may not be in for at least another week. He will have to accept my word on that because her phone is not listed."

George patted my shoulder. "Have fun!"

Naturally, Ward waited until the Friday night crowd started rolling in before he ordered more drinks. I ignored his imperious wave for all of five minutes but, from the look on his face, decided I'd better deal with him before he exploded.

"Sir! Are you sticking with the Bahama Mamas?"

He glared at me. "Yes. And hurry it up."

I went behind the bar and poured all the ingredients into a cocktail shaker: rocks, coffee and coconut liqueurs, dark rum, overproof rum, lemon juice, pineapple juice. Once shaken, this lethal mixture went into two Collins glasses over cracked ice and with a couple of maraschino cherries on top. Not a drink I'd have liked, but the Bests apparently loved sweet and potent drinks to remind them of beachfront atmosphere. It gave me some pleasure to think that these drinks were the only place they'd get it. Outside, the rain poured down, and a westerly kicked up little whitecaps in the Strait.

I set the drinks down carefully.

Ward took a sip of his, then nodded. "All right. Now then, Larry, where is Elizabeth?"

"I don't know." It was none of his business, anyway.

He scowled. "Well, give me her home phone number. I can't sit around here forever, waiting to get this project moving. And I've been spending money. I had an engineer come yesterday to have a quick look at the problems of demolition and a proper foundation."

I'd seen him wandering around out there with a stranger, looking, and pointing at things as if he already owned the place. "I'm sorry, sir, I can't give anybody her home number." He wouldn't have believed me if I'd said I didn't know it.

He started to say something that sounded profane, and Gwendolyn put her hand on his wrist. He closed his mouth, took a breath, and began again. "Look, I think the lady would be unhappy to lose this deal and I need to talk to her. Tonight, or tomorrow."

I apologized again. "I can't give out her home phone number. Those are her instructions to everyone." Which was not a lie. Elizabeth valued her privacy. I had to work hard to hide a smile, though, when I thought of how much damage Bernie might do to Ward if he got pushy with Elizabeth.

"Oh, all right! Hell!" Ward grunted and turned away.

I headed back to my usual station behind the bar, imagining all 175 pounds of Bernie sitting on Ward's face. And found Sergeant Demaratus on Brenda's stool.

Demaratus ordered a beer, and I pushed it across the bar to him. He took a couple of swigs and put the glass down. "I guess you heard about the bones that were found in the hunting cabin."

"Of course."

"I figured. Well, I'll tell you the score and maybe you can spike some of the wild gossip that's going around."

"I'd appreciate that," I said. "I've heard some of those rumors." I knew Brenda would appreciate it, too, and I was looking forward to telling her.

"I'm sure you have," he said drily. "There will be an official announcement in the local paper and on TV, but not until after my assessment has been reviewed by my superiors. That could take a couple of weeks or more."

"Was the person somebody local?"

"Dane Soper. DNA testing proved that." Demaratus paused. "You don't look surprised."

"I've thought about it a lot. Dane wouldn't have gone away without letting somebody know, especially Paradise Realty. And it would only be local people who knew about Bert Zacharias's hunting cabin."

"That's my take on it exactly." Demaratus shook his head. "But why the cabin? He could have offed himself at home."

"You're ruling it as suicide?"

"Yes, definitely. His wife left him and took his son. Everybody says Dane worshipped that kid. There was a bullet hole in the skull and an exit hole where it should be, and a semi-automatic lying beside the bones. Also, a bottle of scotch, half empty. I'd say he drank all of that to give himself courage, and then pulled the trigger."

"Did you find the bullet?"

"We found several bullets," Demaratus said. "The heat of the fire would have caused the bullets left in the weapon to fire themselves. Anything else that might have been evidence was burned when the forest went up. We haven't been able to find any motive for murder, so it has to be suicide."

I nodded. "I guess, though it's hard to imagine Dane committing suicide. He was such a cocky little bastard. But maybe he had hidden depths." Just like I suspected Butch of having hidden depths. "Also, half a bottle of scotch can do seriously bad things to the mind."

"I'd still like to know why he didn't do it at home," Demaratus said.

"I thought of a couple of reasons," I said. "This is a long shot, but he could have been afraid that Trish might come back and find him, and he wouldn't have wanted her and the kid to see him dead. The other guess is that he could have been interrupted at home, with phone calls or

someone coming to the house. And he might have been afraid that a neighbor would hear the shot and call you guys."

"But he was dead the minute that bullet went into his brain."

"He couldn't know for sure he'd succeed, though. He might have been afraid he'd bungle the whole thing, and somebody would try saving him. If he did it in the cabin, it might be weeks or months before he was found. Time enough to die of his injuries." The idea of such slow death gave me the shivers.

Demaratus eyed me. "You've obviously given this a lot of thought."

I shrugged. "I have to do something while I wait for people to order more drinks. Especially if there's nobody to play crib with." I remembered something else. "Did you talk to Bert?"

"As well as you can talk to somebody with beer-scrambled brains," Demaratus said. "He swore he hadn't used that cabin for years, and his wife corroborated that. Also, some of his neighbors. He did say he'd told his niece she could use the place."

"Donna? The librarian?"

"Yeah. Nice girl, that." Demaratus finished off his beer. "I asked her to come down to the station. She said she used to go up there sometimes when she was younger, to get away from her relatives, but not in the last five years or so."

"Another beer?" He shook his head and I added, "I think Donna's pretty much capable of defending herself now."

"I admire her for that," Demaratus said, sliding off the stool. "It's good to see that she got away from them and is building a decent life for herself. Too many young people from families like hers don't make it." He lifted his hand in a farewell salute.

I watched him stride out into the lobby. Then crossed my fingers that Brenda would come in for her usual nightcap.

However, it wasn't Brenda who next sat on her stool. It was Buck Strachan, married to my cousin, Susan. I'd promised Mom I would talk to him, and I hadn't. I don't like interfering in other people's relationships, much like my Mom, whose attitude was, 'if they're old enough to get married, they're old enough to learn how to get along.' But the fact that she'd gone so far as to ask me to talk to him made me think there must be something wrong with either him or his relationship with Susan.

"Can I have a beer, Larry?"

I opened a Blue for him and waved away his money. He rarely came into The Maggie, preferring to sip on a beer while he watched TV from the comfort of his own couch. I'd always assumed Susan sat next to him so they could hold hands.

"So, how's it going?" I asked. "You on days off or are the woods closed for some reason?"

"Days off," he said, "but I have to head back in the morning."

Buck had never been talkative. He was something like six feet six, and weighed 250 well-muscled pounds, so people usually walked very carefully around him. But he seemed as gentle as the proverbial lamb; I'd never heard of him being in a fight.

We talked a little bit about his job of falling trees and about forest fires and about whether it was time to trade in his old pickup truck, interrupted by other customers wanting service. Then he finally got to the point.

"Larry, Susan's not speaking to me."

"Why?"

He heaved a big sigh and ran his fingers through his short brown hair. "I don't understand her thinking. She likes having money to spend, and me buying her things, but she wants me to quit my job and get a job in town, so we can be together all the time."

That was about the longest speech I'd ever heard him make. "But you'd never find work around here that paid as well as logging."

"Yeah, that's what I keep telling her."

"You wouldn't have any money to spend on her."

"Not with the mortgage we got, that's for sure." He looked morose.

"Well, it doesn't make sense," I said. "She can't have it both ways."

"That's what I told her," Buck said, tossing the last of his beer down his throat. "I guess that's why she's mad at me."

"That's tough."

"Yeah." Buck took a deep breath. "I thought maybe you could talk to her, Larry. You're better with words than me. You could make her understand."

I'd already figured out that's what he wanted, and I didn't like it. It was his problem, not mine, and I sure as hell didn't want to get between two people married to each other. They might end up both pounding on me. I could deal with Susan, but I wasn't so sure about Buck, in spite of my training.

Maybe Buck actually had slapped her and was trying to weasel his way out of it. Perhaps that's what Susan didn't understand. So I'd better talk to her, try to dig out the truth, eliminate the 'maybes.'

"Okay, Buck, I'll talk to her."

The grin that split his face was full of relief. "Thanks, Larry, I appreciate it. I'm not much good at saying things, you know that."

"Can I get you another beer?"

He shook his head and got off the stool. "No thanks, buddy. I got to go home and get some sleep. The helicopter takes off at seven in the morning."

He left and I went back to serving drinks and hoping Brenda would come in so I could share the weight of the world with her.

Chapter 11 Nightmare

The nightmare enveloped her, clutched at her throat so tightly she could hardly breathe. She tried to escape, to waken, but she was pinned there in the darkness as if her feet were nailed to the woodshed floor. Through the thin soles of her old runners, she felt sawdust and shreds of bark. The scent of dry wood rose to her nostrils.

The door into the cabin was open an inch, enough for her to see and hear what was happening.

A kerosene lamp on the battered kitchen table cast a soft light over the couch and two people sitting on it. The girl with the long, black hair reached around to put her nearly full glass of scotch on the table, then bent her head and began to undo her blouse. One by one, she slid the luminescent pearl buttons slowly from their buttonholes in the pale blue satin. Slowly, she shrugged her arms out of the sleeves. The blouse slithered down her skin-tight jeans, over the knees, to the rough wood floor.

Dane's eyes glinted. He reached for her lace-covered breasts.

She held up her hands to fend him off and said, her voice low and seductive, "Not yet! I want to look at you first. All of you. Every inch."

He rose, grinning, and pulled his sweatshirt off, then his fresh white tee. "If it turns you on, honey, sure. But don't take forever. The fire in that little heater is cute, but it's still fucking cold in this dump."

The girl's tremulous smile hinted at barely controlled passion. The tip of her tongue slid over her upper lip. "I'll make you warm! Strip for me, Dane. Make it slow and easy. Back away a little so I can see everything you've got." Her breathing speeded up. "You have no idea what it does for me."

Legs spread in a body-builder's stance, he lifted his arms, contracting them to display the biceps, his chest thrust out, his head turned to one side.

His muscles were toned; the watcher could see that from her spy slit, even in the soft light. When she had seen him roaring around in his powerful white BMW, looking polished and smug in a business suit, it hadn't occurred to her that he even had muscles. She tried once again to escape the dream, to escape what she knew was coming.

A gust of wind rattled the cabin's filthy, cobwebbed windows, whistling through the old, cracked panes. Dane lowered his arms and turned his back to the black-haired girl, flexing his shoulder muscles.

"Scrumptious," she murmured. "Absolutely mouth-watering."

"That enough for you?"

As he turned back toward the girl, the watcher knew he was impatient, that he wouldn't wait much longer. She felt a sudden rush of fear, an urge to shout out to the girl to be careful.

Then her pounding heart quieted. Her hands stopped trembling. There was no need for fear. She was Artemis, powerful, in control, intent on revenge. In a moment, she would savor it.

"I want all of it, Dane. Every gorgeous inch." The black-haired girl leaned back against the couch, putting her hands behind her head. Her nipples, firm beneath the sheer bra, seemed aimed toward his mouth.

He stared, hesitated, then kicked his boots away and bent to yank off his socks. He unzipped his jeans, tugged them down over his hips, and stepped free, his erection bulging against the front of his jockey shorts.

"Wow!" The girl's voice was full of admiration and awe. "Oh, Dane, you just don't know what you're doing to me. Come on, take those shorts off. I can't wait for the finale."

"Anything you say, honey."

Artemis could hear his harsh breathing above the softly hissing lamp and the crackling fire. He slid his shorts down, kicked them away, and posed before the girl naked, jaw jutting, stance proud. He swiveled to give her a complete view of his fully erect penis.

"Terrific! Fantastic!" The black-haired girl stood up and reached behind her back to undo her bra.

Dane took a step forward, eyes greedy. "Come on! I can tell you want it. And I'll bet you like it rough."

The girl said loudly, "Yes! Now!"

He grabbed at her bra, saliva appearing at the corner of his mouth.

Artemis shoved the woodshed door open and strode forward, the second watcher right behind her. Dane did not hear their nearly silent sneaker-shod feet, nor the soft slithering of long white, hooded robes as they moved up behind him.

The second watcher raised a short length of steel pipe, wrapped in a towel so as to leave no bruises. With a controlled, almost gentle movement, she cracked it on the side of his head, above the ear. He fell forward, knocking the half-naked girl onto the sofa.

"For Chrissake, get him off me!"

They hoisted him up so she could get free, then laid him on the couch, on his left side, facing out toward the room.

"Are you sure he won't come to?" The girl finished buttoning her blouse, then retrieved a long white hooded robe from her backpack behind the couch and put it on.

The two women pushed their hoods back. Artemis felt a quivering tension in her neck and her head, in her shoulders, in her legs. But it was the tension of controlled rage and power, not the shaking terror of a weak human.

The black-haired girl picked up Dane's tee from the floor and used it to lift his glass from the table and set it on the floor, where he would have put it if he'd been lying on the couch drinking.

"Do the same with the bottle," Artemis said.

The girl did so. "For Chrissake, hurry up! What if he comes to?"

The goddess pulled a semi-automatic handgun out of the deep pocket of her robe. She closed Dane's right hand around the grip, his right forefinger around the trigger. With the second watcher's help, she lifted his arm and placed the muzzle hard against his temple. Carefully, she cocked the weapon.

"For Chrissake, he'd better be right-handed!" The girl was tense, breathless.

"Too late to check that," the second watcher said.

Artemis squeezed Dane's finger against the trigger.

His body jerked, blood spattering from the wound. His muscles collapsed. They let go of his arm and the gun tumbled to the floor, landing beside the bottle and glass. The fire in the heater bit into old cedar and hissed sparks against the thin metal.

Artemis sucked in a deep breath against the tightness in her chest. "Take your positions," she said.

They lined up before the couch, one on either side of her, and joined hands. "Speak the dedication words," she instructed.

The second watcher spoke clearly. "Artemis, virgin huntress, goddess of the moon, we bring you sacrifice. This male defiled one of your maidens, thus defiling us all. With his blood we

pledge ourselves to your service for all time." She paused. "Goddess, if the sacrifice is acceptable, guide our hands." She stepped back a pace.

The fire hissed, the wind howled around the cabin.

The second watcher whispered, "All is good. The Goddess approves."

The black-haired girl, her voice shaking, said, "I hope nobody heard that shot."

Artemis clamped a steadying hand on the girl's arm. "Hush! It's all over."

Yes, it was all over. The goddess had accepted the tribute and was gone. The first watcher was herself again. She must make sure they left no traces.

To the dark girl, she said, "Wipe your fingerprints off whatever you touched. Empty your glass onto the floor next to his and knock him over. Put your glass in your backpack; it must look as though he was here alone."

The girl complied. "What about the lamp?"

"Leave it," she said. "The flame will go out when the wick burns down. Anyway, nobody can see the light from the road."

"What about his clothes?" the second watcher asked.

She had forgotten he was naked. "Too late to dress him now. Fold them neatly and pile them on the end of the couch. When people commit suicide, no one knows what their thoughts may be before they do it. Maybe he was doing some kind of ritual."

They moved toward the door and stopped for one last careful look. She said, "Take off your robes now, in case anybody's out there, and put them in the garbage bags in the back of the pickup. When you get home, burn all of it. Shoes, clothes, robes, everything. The purification must be complete."

They stepped outside the cabin, into the darkness.

Car headlights blinded them.

Highlighted in the beams were four RCMP officers, the yellow stripes on their trousers showing up like narrow beacons, like the flame in the oil lamp. They had their weapons raised, aiming at the women.

"Put your hands up," snapped the sergeant.

She felt his gloved hand gripping her arm.

Chapter 12 Brenda hears news

On Sunday morning, as I was sipping my first mug of high-octane jet fuel and struggling with the *New York Times* crossword, Charlie phoned.

"Good morning, beautiful! Would you like me to cook brunch for you?"

"Oh, Charlie, I'd love it!"

"Eggs and bacon and hash browns?"

"Absolutely!"

"Whole-wheat toast and home-made marmalade?"

"Perfect!"

"Topped off with freshly ground and brewed coffee?"

"I can't think of anything I'd like better."

"You're sure now?"

"Charlie!"

He laughed. "Come on over. I'll pour you something to drink while I'm doing my cookery thing."

Anticipating Charlie's wizardry in the kitchen, I left the crossword puzzle without a backward glance, patted DeeCee on her little furry head, slid into my coat, and walked quickly over to Charlie's house. He opened the door, kissed me on both cheeks, and led me into the kitchen.

"Here's your wake-up beverage," he said, handing me a champagne glass. "Orange juice with just the tiniest touch of champagne. I don't want you to fall down on your way home."

I lifted my glass to clink with his and sat at one end of the table. "You seem in a good mood." The smell of perking coffee and frying bacon filled the room.

"Things are going really well," Charlie said, as he worked at the counter. "I had a lunch date with Larry's grandmother, and she gave me so much information that I wished I had a tape-recorder instead of just a pen and notepad."

"Larry did say that she loves to tell stories."

"Dorinda had plenty of them to tell," Charlie went on. "She worked for the Tweedsmuir family here for a little more than fifty years and she's even kept track of all Charlotte Tweedsmuir's nieces and nephews, right down through the third generation."

"You must have had a long lunch!"

"A lot longer than I expected," he said, "but well worth the time. Charlotte was very happy with what I reported to her and said she'd suspected as much."

"Suspected what?"

"That all her kin are as respectable as they appear to be, with one exception."

"And who would that be?"

Charlie frowned as he broke eggs into the frying pan. "I shouldn't tell you. Though you probably already know him, or about him."

I mentally reviewed what I knew of the Tweedsmuir family. "I suspect you're talking about Anthony Reimer, son of one of Charlotte's nieces. I've never heard any gossip about the rest of them."

"How clever of you to guess!" Charlie slid a plate in front of me. "Be careful with that; it's hot."

"It wasn't hard to guess. Anthony's had affairs with at least half a dozen women in town, some married and some not. His wife has ignored his behavior, and more than one person has told me that she's hoping he inherits a bundle from Charlotte. Everybody knows Charlotte's rolling in it."

"Anthony's wife is doomed to disappointment, then." Charlie pushed the salt and pepper containers toward me. "Charlotte isn't really a prude, but she doesn't approve of spouses cheating on each other. She's cut him out of her will."

"According to the gossip, he deserves it," I said. "My informants tell me he's a spoiled brat."

Charlie put his fork down and raised his eyebrows. "How can you be a spoiled brat at fifty?"

"Anthony's mother raised him to believe that he was entitled to everything his little heart desired. He desired me at one point and seemed unable to believe I could be so silly as to turn him down. He refused to take no for an answer until I lost my temper." I smiled at the memory.

"I should have asked you about the family in the first place." Charlie's tone was rueful. "You probably know as much as Dorinda."

"No, I don't. I know most of the Tweedsmuir clan only well enough to say 'hi' to if I meet them on the street and I've never heard bad gossip about any of them except Anthony. That's not to say there's no cause for gossip, but some people are better than others at keeping secrets. Dorinda worked for the family for so long she's bound to know a lot more than I do."

"Well, I must admit that most of her stories were a bit boring," Charlie said. "She did tell me about a couple of divorces, but that news didn't shake Charlotte."

I reached for the marmalade dish. "What happens if Anthony tries to break the will?"

"He wouldn't succeed. Charlotte has explicitly stated in her will her reason for disinheriting him, which should be sufficient to settle the matter."

"Well, I'm glad you have a happy client."

"Me, too. Happy clients pay their bills."

We chatted about inconsequential things until the meal was over, then retired to the living room to sit in soft chairs, drink coffee, and admire the beauty of Deception Bay from Charlie's floor-to-ceiling windows. This last week of October had produced a replay of the perfect weather we'd had in early September. The sky was blue, the sun bright, and the trees still sported a few red or yellow leaves. The bay itself was a smooth, deep blue. The ivy leaves still covering the front of the Wayfarer Inn were a deep, vivid red.

Finally, my curiosity won out over my respect for privacy. "How are you making out with Gina?"

"All right." He hesitated. "I think. At least, she's agreed to have dinner with me."

The Charlie I'd known and loved for three years was confident and gave the impression of being fully in control, no matter the situation. The Charlie I was looking at now seemed worried and unsure.

"Is this the first time you've been in love?" I asked.

He sighed and nodded. "I'm full of clichés today, but I have to say that it's hit me like a ton of bricks."

"I think you and Gina might do very well together."

Charlie slammed his fist on the table, rattling his empty coffee cup in its saucer. I was so surprised I nearly dropped my full one on his pristine cream carpet. "How can you say that, Brenda? You know my situation. She's never going to put up with that."

Of course, he had every right to worry. I'd known him so long, and liked him so much, that I rarely thought about his sexual orientation.

I decided to give him a tiny hint. "Gina, too, has her secrets," I said.

He looked at me for a long, long moment. He knew that I must have some relevant knowledge about Gina, but he also knew I wouldn't tell him. Though that didn't stop him from trying to pry it out of me.

"Come on, Brenda! You've said you love me, and you know I love you. Can't you do this for me? Can't you tell me what you know?"

"As I recall, you were thoroughly pissed off when I told Larry your secret."

He leaned across the oak coffee table toward me, his expression intense. "That worked out all right, didn't it? And you knew it would work or you wouldn't have done it. I finally clued in on that. So why won't you tell me Gina's secret?"

"This is a totally different situation." I put the coffee cup down. "You'll have to be brave and confess your shortcomings to her. Only then will she be brave enough to confess hers to you. I'm sure she wouldn't, otherwise."

"You mean it's a matter of trust?"

"Of course it is. If you can trust each other with your secrets, that's half the battle." I wasn't doing too well with clichés myself. "What I meant is that trust is essential to any close relationship." And that sounded like it came out of a psychology text, but at least he'd clearly understand what I was saying.

He leaned back again and sighed. "Well, tell me this, at least. Will she laugh at me?"

"No, never."

"You're sure?"

"As sure as I'm sitting here talking to you."

Charlie rose. "I'll get you a second cup."



By the time I'd walked home from Charlie's place, it was time to change clothes and drive to Toby's for the afternoon archery lesson. Apparently, the goddess was annoyed with me for scoring a bull's-eye during that last session, and had decided to punish me for hubris. Or something. I never came near the bull's-eye, and a couple of times, I even missed the target altogether. Toby smiled at my frustration and said, "Don't worry, it happens to everyone. I'm sure you'll be fine at the next practice."

Back home again, I tried to wash off my frustration in the shower and soothe my body with steak and salad for supper, but neither cure was completely effective. So I decided to walk down to The Maggie and have a gossip with Larry. Besides, I hadn't seen him since Thursday, and I was missing him.

When I perched on my favorite stool, Larry looked up from his book and exclaimed, "God, where have you been? I haven't seen you since Thursday night and I've been dying to tell you the latest about Dane Soper."

I took the first refreshing sip of my drink, then bit into a lemon slice. "I intended to come, but I had to go out both Friday and Saturday nights with clients and by the time I'd finished with them, I was too pooped to move."

"Did you sell something?"

"Yes, indeed! Sometimes being on call twenty-four seven is worth it. They both signed offers and both offers were accepted. Which means I can make car payments for the next six months and also pay for my gin and tonic without wrecking the cat food budget."

Larry grinned and, after eyeing the customers to make sure he wasn't being watched, slid a warm hand over mine and squeezed. "Way to go, babe!"

"Thanks! Now, what about Dane Soper?"

"Demaratus came in Friday night and told me the score. He said the rumors flying around were so wild that he wanted somebody to know the truth and perhaps quiet things down. He knows this bar is a breeding ground for all kinds of gossip. It'll be at least a couple of weeks before the news is in the paper or on TV."

I was almost too interested to work on my gin and tonic. But not quite. "This bar is where everybody gets the local news. Am I to take it the bones found in the cabin belong to Dane?"

"They do," Larry said. "As we thought, DNA testing proved that."

"Murder or suicide?"

Out of the corner of my eye, I glimpsed one of the customers raise his empty glass and hold it on top of his head. Larry immediately went to his aid and, as usual, I had to wait for the answer to my question.

"Suicide," Larry said, when he came back. "Though I don't think that's been completely proven or that it can be. The fire destroyed fingerprints along with any other evidence there might have been. All they have are the bones and a semi-automatic gun lying beside the body. Oh, and a half-empty bottle of scotch."

"But, obviously, the gun must have been lying in the right position. And one of the bullets in the chamber must have been fired."

Larry nodded. "Every one had been fired. If Dane didn't pull the trigger on all of them, the heat of the fire caused the rest to fire themselves."

"Demaratus is sure it was suicide?"

"Yes, he is. And I have to agree with that conclusion. He said he'd been unable to find a motive for murder. And everybody knows Dane was crushed by his wife leaving and taking his son with her."

"I don't believe Dane was the kind of person who would commit suicide. He liked himself too much." That was rather a catty thing to say, but Larry and I were interested in hearing the truth, not compliments for being 'nice.'

"Oh, for sure! But if he was depressed about his wife and kid leaving, a half bottle of scotch on top of it could have made the difference. Alcohol is a depressant, you know."

"Not for everybody."

"Anyway," Larry said, "Demaratus seemed more concerned about why he'd done it in the cabin instead of at home. And I suggested he didn't want to risk getting interrupted by somebody knocking at the door, or Trish coming back suddenly and finding him."

"Did he interview Bert Zacharias?"

Larry nodded. "And Donna as well. Neither of them had been to the cabin in years."

I pushed my glass across to him for a refill. "I saw her today at archery practice and she didn't say anything about it."

"Why would she?"

"Of course. I keep forgetting that not everybody is as keen on the local news scene as you and I. And I don't suppose she found it any fun being interrogated."

Larry left to check the occupied tables and refreshed several drinks. By the time he'd finished, I had another question. "How did Dane get to the cabin? His car was at home. He didn't take a cab."

"Demaratus figures he must have hitchhiked."

"Dane? Hitchhike? I have a lot of trouble with that picture."

"He might have," Larry said, "if he was determined to die and to do it his way. He'd want to be someplace nobody would find him and try to rescue him."

"But nobody has come forward to say they gave him a ride."

"It could have been someone just passing through, not somebody local who would know Dane."

I sighed. "Well, you have all the possible answers, and they may be right. If the cops think so, too, then you probably are."

"But the answers don't sit right with you?"

"Not completely, no. How did Dane know about the cabin? He'd never be buddy-buddy with a man like Bert Zacharias."

"No, he wouldn't," Larry said. "But he was a realtor. He'd collect every bit of knowledge that he could about the real estate in this area. Right?"

I nodded. "Right. What you say is quite reasonable. So maybe it's my suspicious mind working overtime."

Larry smiled at me. "I've got a suspicious mind, too. But I didn't know Dane Soper as well as you did, so the conclusions Demaratus had worked for me."

"Then I guess we have to leave it at that."

"As far as the local news is concerned, yes. But I might come up with another scenario."

I raised my eyebrows. "Why?"

Larry said, "I'm still thinking about writing a short story featuring Dane's death. Not that I'd use his name or this locale, of course. Perhaps a mystery story. There's supposed to be a good market for those."

"You haven't mentioned your writing lately."

"That's because I haven't been doing much. I can blame part of that on spending a lot of time on Elizabeth's hotel accounting records, but part of it is just plain lack of self-discipline."

"But you don't have to write, do you? I mean, you started it as an excuse not to play poker with Dane."

"That's true," Larry said, "but then I found out I like rewriting the same paragraph forty-seven times in order to get it right."

I sensed someone at my elbow and turned to see Jerry from the lumberyard.

"Hi, guys," Jerry said. "Sorry to interrupt, Larry, but I wondered if you want to play some poker. I'm getting a game together for next Saturday night. My place. Usual time."

"If I can get Kelly to work my shift, I will," Larry said. "I'll let you know."

Jerry grinned happily. "Great. And while I'm here, how about another Blue?"

Larry got a bottle of Blue from the fridge, and Jerry went off to his table.

"I'm glad you're getting back in the game," I said.

"Me, too. Now that all the bad guys have gone. One way or another."

We were both silent for a few minutes, thinking about the bad guys. Dane was dead, Ray would be in prison for years, Josh was divorced and broke, Hollis had moved away, and Hank was in a mental hospital. I let my imagination run away with me and imagined it was the goddess meting out justice for Gina's rapists.

Larry's voice brought me back to normal reality. "Is Paradise Realty going to hire another realtor? Somebody to replace Dane?"

"I have no idea. Paul hasn't said anything, but then he never does. He makes things happen, and I go into the office and get surprised." It was my turn to ask a hard question. "Has Elizabeth made a decision yet?"

Larry groaned. "If she has, she hasn't told anyone. And, believe me, I've been bugging Sam and George every day. Just in case she phoned one of them, you know."

I handed him my glass. "I think I can handle a third drink."

"Driving or walking?"

"Walking."

"Okay." He mixed the drink and added extra lemon slices.

I bit into one and got the usual sharp bite, then the pure pleasure of fresh lemon flavor. "I'm sure Elizabeth would tell all three of you at once. From what you've told me, I'd say she's very fair in her dealings."

"She would. And one of the reasons I'm hoping she won't sell is because this year I want to take you to the Christmas party at her house. I think you'd love the place."

"Christmas party? For all the staff? So, who runs the hotel while that's happening?"

"Oh, obviously I never told you. She has two parties, one before Christmas, and then another for New Year's, though sometimes that one is later than January first, depending on when she disappears for her usual week off. Half the staff comes to one party, and the other half to the other."

"Very fair! And I hope it works out; I've never been in any of those big old properties along Tweedsmuir. It's one of the sorrows of my life; nobody who lives in one ever wants to sell it."

Larry glanced up at the clock. "I'm allowed to have a beer now." After he'd poured himself a Heineken, he said, "Hallowe'en is next Wednesday. What do you say we go trick or treating?"

I laughed. "Right! We make people tell us the latest gossip or we soap their windows."

"Oh, better than that," Larry said. "They have to tell us a secret, which of course we promise not to pass on."

"I think we'd probably get run out of town."

"Okay, you're right. So, let's go out to dinner Friday night. I have the day off."

"That's a deal."

"Wait, let's see if Charlie wants to join us."

"I'll phone him," I said. "He told me he has a dinner date with Gina, but I don't know what day."

Larry grinned. "We could make it a foursome, then, and come in here for a drink before we eat."

"Ohhh, I can see the faces now! Just when they think they've got us figured out, we spring a new combination on them."

"Wait a minute," Larry said, "I've just remembered something else. Family gossip this time."

Larry seldom talked about his family, and I assumed they never did anything that would trigger our brand of investigative curiosity.

"What's up?"

He explained that his cousin, Susan, had complained to his mom. She said that her husband had slapped her. And his mom asked Larry to speak to Buck, the husband.

"And do you think he did slap Susan?"

Larry sighed. "I don't know. He's a big, gentle guy and I find it hard to believe he'd slap anything. But how do I know what's under that calm exterior?"

"You didn't do your psychoanalysis thing on him?"

"No, too difficult. Getting more than six words at a time out of him is almost impossible." Larry glanced around the room and went off to deliver another drinks order. When he came back, he said, "I phoned Susan and asked her what was going on."

"Wouldn't you have achieved more by going to see her?" I asked. "You can read a lot from a person's facial expressions and body movements. But, of course, you know that."

"Yes," he said. "That's what I should have done, but I've never liked having conversations with Susan. She was a spoiled brat as a kid, and she's got a strong sense of entitlement as an adult. I'd probably end up wanting to slap her myself."

"Yeah, but if he's hitting her..."

Larry sighed again. "You're right. And I didn't get much out of the phone call except that she insists he hit her and has threatened to do so several times. When I asked her why, she started crying. And I couldn't get another sensible word out of her."

"I see what you mean. She uses tears when she doesn't want to say anything." I finished my drink and pushed the glass across the bar. "What's your mom say?" I'd talked to Jean a few times and liked her. She always gave what I thought were straight answers.

"She doesn't know what to believe, either."

I covered Larry's hand with mine, then slid off the stool. "I'll sleep on that problem. You'd better sleep on it, too. Between us, we'll come up with something."

Larry's face finally relaxed into a grin. "We could sleep on it together."

"Yes, but we wouldn't be thinking about Susan and Buck, would we?"

"Definitely not."

Chapter 13 Larry celebrates

Early Thursday afternoon, I hunched over Elizabeth's desk, getting the books up to date and balancing off the payroll for October. The head maintenance man was cleaning the soap marks off her narrow office windows, which were easily reachable from the driveway. I should know; I'd soaped them myself one Hallowe'en when I was a kid.

I heard the door handle turn and finished the entry I was making before I looked up, expecting Sam or one of the cleaning staff.

A furry giant of a dog tried to climb into my lap and, over his head, I saw Elizabeth walking in. I got myself disentangled from Bernie, fed him a treat, and gave my boss an enthusiastic smile. "Elizabeth! I'm glad you're feeling better."

Then I realized there was someone else behind her. A tall, beautiful, black-haired woman, with skin the color of coffee with cream, someone I'd never seen before. She smiled at me.

Elizabeth said, "I'm fine, Larry."

I started to move away from her desk so she could sit in her own chair, but she waved me back and sat down in the guest chair.

"I'm not staying. My flu seems to be gone, but Magda thinks I should take at least another week of rest." The tall woman rested her hand gently on Elizabeth's shoulder.

Who was this Magda? She certainly didn't live in the village. I tried to think of something intelligent to say, but Elizabeth beat me to it.

"Larry, this is my daughter, Magdalena Renney."

My jaw dropped into my lap. Or that's what it felt like. I just couldn't get my tongue to work. Both women looked amused.

Elizabeth glanced up at Magdalena. "I told you he'd be shocked. Larry's hobby is knowing everything about everybody and being the expert on what's happening in the village. But I doubt he's ever suspected me of being a mother."

I stood up and held out my hand to Magdalena. "I'm glad to meet you, and sorry to be such a klutz, but it's a known 'fact' in the village that Elizabeth never had any children."

"I'm glad to meet you, too," Magdalena said. "Over the years I've heard so much about the village and the people who live here that I feel like I already know you all."

Elizabeth waved her arm at some chairs between the windows. "Pull one of those over, Magda, and relax while I bring Larry up to date."

I wanted to hold my breath. Or maybe I already was. I knew by Elizabeth's tone that she'd made her decision about selling the hotel and that I was about to learn what my future held.

Elizabeth leaned forward. "I'm not going to sell the hotel."

I leaned back, the breath whooshing from my lungs. Maybe I had been holding it. For darn nearly six weeks. "Whew! That's a big relief!" Bernie, who had been sitting beside me, suddenly saw that my lap might be available and put a tentative but heavy paw on my thigh. I slid off the chair to my knees, put my arms around the shaggy brute and hugged him. I wanted to hug Elizabeth, but I knew Bernie would have to be a substitute. Both women were laughing.

When I got Bernie and myself sorted out again, I asked, "What happens next?"

"As you may have guessed by now," Elizabeth said, "Magdalena is my new assistant. She'll be learning the various aspects of hotel-keeping from me and also taking courses. And she'll spend some time doing every job there is around here, so that she can learn, from personal experience, what the problems are."

"I'm not going to do the accounting," Magda said, "though I want to learn how it all works."

I said, "I have a confession to make about that. I bought accounting software for my laptop, and I've been using it ever since you left. I can transfer the entries to your books."

Elizabeth looked pleased. "No need, Larry. I'm glad to see you have initiative. I used the big old record books because that's what I was used to. Habit, you understand. I want you to go on doing the accounting, and you can use any system you like. But I want the software set up on my office computer, so the information is available to me, or to Magda, when we need it. I suppose your laptop could be considered a back-up."

"There are simpler ways of doing that," I said, "but yes, the laptop should definitely be hooked into the office computer. Then I can use the laptop anywhere else when you're busy in here."

"You figure that out, Larry, and then show Magda and me how it works. We'll discuss a pay rate next week when I come back to work."

"That's great," I said. "Will Magda be learning how to tend bar?"

"Indeed I will," Magda said, smiling. "I'll be taking a barkeeping course, but I'll need someone to teach me the practical application. And I'd like to practice under a watchful eye."

Oh, I'd be watching, all right! As would George. As would most of Deception Bay; she was hot physically, with a brain to match, a dynamite combination.

"Elizabeth," I said, knowing I had no business to be asking the question, "have you told Ward Best that he can't have the hotel?"

"Yes, I telephoned him just before we came here." She looked at me for a few seconds. "Why? Do you think he's going to come into the bar and complain to you?"

I nodded. "He's complained to me about a lot of things over the last six weeks."

"In other words, he made a pest of himself."

"Um, yes."

"My impression from the phone call," said Elizabeth, "was that he'd be leaving Deception Bay with his tail between his legs."

"I hope so."

She gave me a questioning look. "Were you worried that I might sell the property to him?"

"Very worried! Before you went away you said you were tired and that retirement with plenty of money was sounding like a good deal. I really was afraid you'd do it."

Elizabeth smiled. "Yes, I was tired. Very tired. But I'm all right now. I should start taking longer vacations, I suppose. But I don't want to retire. Running a business means having lots of responsibilities, but also the fun of creating something worthwhile. I don't ever want to give that up."

Magda reached over and patted her mother's hand. "I feel the same way, so we're both going to have fun."

While they smiled at each other, I took another dog treat out of the desk drawer and leaned down to sneak it to Bernie. For such a large animal, he was remarkably gentle with his mouth, and he managed to get the treat without chewing on my fingers.

"I saw that," Elizabeth said. "You're spoiling that dog again."

"Guilty as charged. I haven't seen him for weeks."

"Well, you can get back to your work now," she said, "because we're leaving. I'm going to introduce Magda to George. We've already astonished Sam."

The two women rose. At the door, Elizabeth turned to me. "You needn't have worried about me selling the hotel to that insufferable, egotistical little idiot. Deception Bay is my home; I wouldn't willingly inflict someone like that on it."

The door closed behind them. *Now she tells me*, I thought. *Now she tells me!* Six weeks of worry, and all for nothing. But at least six weeks of worry had shown me how much the place meant to me.



That evening Brenda arrived at The Maggie around ten, earlier than usual, and I thought she must have come directly from her karate class. Not that I bothered asking whether that was so; I was too eager to tell her my news.

"Glad you're here," I said to her, as she settled on her pet stool.

"Me, too," she said. "I need a drink. Or several. I was sparring with a newbie tonight and she's over-confident about her throwing techniques. I have a lot of bruises. But you look like you just won the million."

"Well, kinda. Guess what?"

"Larry! I'm hurting all over."

"Sorry! I'm so excited I was forgetting to do my job." I quickly built a gin and tonic and added four lemon slices. "I put in extra gin, so be careful. Especially if you've taken a pain pill."

"I haven't taken anything. The gin will work faster than a pill." She downed a couple of big swallows of the drink. "So, what's the wonderful news?"

"Elizabeth came in this afternoon."

The comment got Brenda's full attention. Eyes wide, shoulders forward and tense, she demanded, "And? Is she selling or not selling?"

I couldn't help the big grin spreading across my face. "Not."

Brenda's grin matched my own. "Whew! No wonder you're happy. Are you going to be her new assistant?"

I glanced around the bar to see how the customers were doing. Only five tables were occupied. I guessed that there'd been some Hallowe'en parties the night before, and most of the participants were nursing hangovers. Anyway, the customers all seemed happy, so maybe I'd be able to tell the whole story without interruption. "No. I'm going to continue as accountant, though."

Brenda frowned. "And give up bartending?"

"Never!"

"I'm glad!" She put her hand over mine. "I'd really miss our late-night drinking and gossiping."

"Me, too. And I'd miss the customers and learning what's going on. No, the accounting will be part-time. It'll probably just mean working four shifts a week behind the bar instead of the usual five. Maybe three sometimes."

"Does Ward Best know she's not going to sell?"

I nodded. "And she said I shouldn't have worried about her selling to him, that she would never sell to somebody like him."

"So *now* she tells you!"

"My words exactly."

Brenda downed another three gulps of her drink. "Elizabeth is a prince, or a queen, or whatever you call someone who does something good. If I ever meet her, I'll hug her."

That made me laugh, and I told her about being so happy to hear the news that I'd hugged Bernie the dog. "Elizabeth is a bit imposing," I said. "She's not somebody you hug unless she's invited you to do it."

"Okay, I'll keep that in mind. So, how is she going to manage without an assistant?"

"She isn't. You'll never guess who."

Brenda pushed her glass across the bar. "Do that again. It's beginning to work, but I need another one fast. Then you'd better tell me who, because I couldn't possibly guess."

I fixed her drink and waited until she'd taken two or three samples of it. "No, you'd never guess. Nor would anyone else in this town. She's hiring her daughter."

"Daughter?" Brenda was so surprised that the word came out as a squeak. "But she has no children!"

Naturally, that's when a couple of customers decided they needed another drink and Brenda had to wait for the most fascinating news of the day. I came back to the bar as fast as I could and said, "Yes, she does. One daughter, named Magdalena."

"But how did that happen?"

I started to laugh.

"Okay, okay, I know how it happened, but when did it happen, and why didn't we know?"

"The daughter was illegitimate. By the way, I didn't get all this direct from Elizabeth, but when I cornered Sam and George, they told me all the details she didn't get around to telling me. I'm sure she knew they would."

"Well, get on with it! I'm dying of curiosity."

"This all happened back in 1974, when Elizabeth was twenty. She went to San Francisco to go to college and stayed with a second cousin of her father's. She soon acquired a tall, handsome Jamaican boyfriend and came home at Christmas, pregnant. Her parents were horrified and shipped her back to San Francisco immediately, with instructions to give birth there and put the baby up for adoption."

"I'll bet she was also instructed never to breathe a word to anyone here," said Brenda, playing with a lemon slice.

"Yeah, Sam did tell me she said her parents were seriously unevolved. Anyway, the baby was adopted, and Elizabeth had a deal with the adoptive parents that she could see the child and interact with her whenever she had time. She continued at college in San Francisco for another three years, so she got to spend a lot of time with Magdalena as a baby. After she came back and started learning the hotel business from her parents, she still managed to get down to San Francisco a couple of times a year."

"Wow! What a story! So is Magdalena black?"

"Light brown. Coffee with real cream. Gorgeous. Most important, she and Elizabeth seem to have a close relationship."

Brenda tilted her head a bit and raised her eyebrows. "Gorgeous, huh?"

I blew a kiss at her. "Yep. And I'm going to enjoy looking, every chance I get. But that's all."

"I'm glad," Brenda said. "I may possibly be losing Charlie to Gina, and I don't want to lose all my boy toys."

"Toy boys."

"Whatever. So did Elizabeth name Magdalena after the island out in the Strait?"

"No, and that surprised me. We've always thought The Maggie was named after that island, but it wasn't. The bar was called 'The Tartan Room' until Elizabeth took over the hotel, and she changed it to 'The Magdalena Room,' after her daughter.

"I wonder why," Brenda mused, as she pushed her glass across to me again. "I need another one."

"You've already had both wings."

"Yes, mother. Can't this one can be a tail feather or something?"

"Okay, but you're not going to drive home."

She patted me on the arm. "I'll walk. Wouldn't be the first time."

I was still thinking about her question. "I don't know why she named the child Magdalena. Maybe because she looked Spanish and so needed a Spanish name."

"What's Magdalena's story?" Brenda asked. "She must be about forty-four, forty-five now. And why hasn't Elizabeth ever said anything?"

"Keeping the secret could have just become a habit. Besides, Magda had her life in San Francisco, a husband and a couple of kids, as well as her adoptive parents. There would have been no reason to tell anyone here."

"She's divorced now?"

I nodded. "Apparently, the break-up was brutal, and she wanted to start a new life somewhere else. Her kids are both in college and living with the adoptive grandparents. It's a quick flight from here to San Francisco, so I'm assuming we'll meet the kids someday soon."

Brenda was looking more relaxed now. Perhaps she was right about gin, tonic, and sour lemon slices being better than a pain pill. Those would certainly taste better. She said, "Does Magdalena have a career, or profession, or anything?"

"I don't think so. George said she told him she likes doing design work and was in business for herself for a few years. So I imagine she can cope okay with the hotel business. And she's going to take all the available courses on it."

The drinkers were down to three tables, and it looked like the rest of the night would be quiet. I poured myself a Heineken and watched Brenda slowly absorbing her drink. "Did you phone Charlie about dinner tomorrow night?"

"Oh! Yes, I did, and he said it would be fine with him as long as Gina agrees. I guess their big dinner date was also for tomorrow night. I left my cell in the car when I went into the dojo and forgot to check for messages when I came out."

"I hope she'll agree," I said. "It would be nearly as much fun for us to walk in here as a foursome as it was to do it as a threesome."

"Especially after we did it as a threesome!" Brenda said. "After that, nobody will know what to expect."



The next night, Friday, when we walked into the bar, with Gina on Charlie's arm, and Brenda on mine, we did get some curious looks, but not the shocked reactions that Brenda, Charlie, and I got when it was just the three of us. Again, we ended up at the table next to the one where the girls from the bank were sitting. They were so busy talking that they didn't bother looking up when we sat down.

We settled in and looked around. The bar was nearly full, normal for a Friday night, and even George was there with his wife, Eileen, and some people I'd never seen before. Maybe her

relatives from Vancouver. The steady hum of conversation and the commentary on a hockey game emanating from the television added up to a muted roar, which would get louder as the night wore on. However, it was still possible to order drinks without yelling when Kelly came to the table.

After Kelly brought the drinks, Sheila from the bank suddenly realized we were there and put a hand on my arm. "Larry! Is it true what I hear? Does Elizabeth truly have a daughter? And she's here in town?"

"Truly," I said. "And she's going to be Elizabeth's assistant."

"And her name is Magdalena?"

"Yes, it is. Who told you?"

"Oh," Sheila said, "Jenny-Lou Atkins came into the bank this afternoon, and she knew. Then when we came in, we stopped and asked George."

"If you've talked to George, you know everything I know."

"But what does she look like, this Magdalena?"

"Pretty."

Sheila huffed. "That's what George said. Not very helpful."

I couldn't help myself. "My grandmother used to say, 'pretty is as pretty does'."

"Oh, Larry!" Sheila scowled. "Sometimes you are a complete pain in the ass."

I grinned at her. "I know. But it keeps you amused, doesn't it?"

She punched me in the arm, a sure sign that she'd forgiven me, and turned back to Ann and Laura.

That left the four of us to talk to each other and it looked as if I'd have to start something at our table, too. Gina hadn't said a word other than 'hello' and 'Coke, please,' and Charlie was watching over her like a mother hen with only one chick. Brenda was happily wrapping herself around the usual gin and tonic, rubbing at the purple bruise on her elbow, and eyeing the rest of the room as though she was wondering how to stir up some action.

"So," I said, "Brenda, did you tell Charlie and Gina about Dane Soper's death being put down to suicide?"

She switched her attention to me. "Of course."

"Are they really sure it was him?" Gina asked.

"Positive," I said, knowing that she was eager for the answer. "The case has been closed, and they would never do that unless they were sure of the deceased's identity."

We rehashed the details until the time came for a second drink. Brenda said, "No, let's go and have dinner. I'm hungry."

"Me, too," said Gina.

"I think we're old news," Charlie said. "Nobody is paying the slightest bit of attention to our existence."

"We've been completely upstaged by Dane's suicide and Elizabeth's daughter," I said.

"Which suits me just fine. With any luck, something else will replace those juicy items and, instead of being last week's history, we'll be ancient history."

Brenda smiled. "Ancient, maybe, but unforgettable."

We went next door to the Blueback Grill, ate grilled halibut, caught that morning, and talked about everything except Deception Bay. We stayed so long that James, the chef, came and sat with us and told us stories about his apprenticeship in Vancouver and Whistler. By the time Charlie announced that it was time he took Gina home, they both seemed relaxed and appeared to be enjoying themselves.

We said good night outside the hotel. Charlie helped Gina into the Mazda. As his taillights vanished around a corner, I took Brenda's hand and we headed toward her house at a leisurely pace. "I think those two were relaxed by the time we got halfway through the meal," I said. The night air was chilly and fresh and, fortunately, not raining on us. It was good, for a change, to listen to silence instead of the muted roar of the bar.

"Yes," Brenda said. "I wonder if they'll become an item."

"Even if they do, you'll never lose him as a friend."

"I know, but if he and Gina become a twosome, I won't be able to spend as much time with him. She'd have first call on his time and energy."

"How would you feel about having conversations with both of them together?"

Brenda was silent for a few steps. "I think it would be fine. You know, I guess I was thinking of him as a boyfriend, not a friend."

"Not surprising, since everybody else thinks of him that way. Or did. One can only wonder what they might be thinking now."

I slid an arm gently around her shoulders. "Am I hitting any black and blue spots?"

"No, it's fine, Larry." She snuggled in a little closer and we walked another few steps. "I wonder if they'll tell each other their secrets."

"I hope so." Brenda had told me her comment to Charlie about it being a matter of trust and I agreed. "It's good to have someone you can trust, but there might be more benefits to that. If they accept each other, including all the deep, dark secrets, they might both become more confident. They might even be able to tell other people their secrets without worrying about the consequences."

"That would be sweet," Brenda said.

I stopped under a streetlight, turned her towards me, and we had a long, tender kiss. I didn't care who saw us, what they thought, or what they might say about it.

"It is very sweet," I said.

Chapter 14 Getting away with murder

Toby broke out of the nightmare and fought against the blankets pinning her to the bed. For a moment, she was back in the cabin woodshed. But she finally shook off the blankets and sat up, trembling.

Every time the nightmare came, it stopped with the police catching them, but it hadn't ended that way in real life. Instead, the three of them had squeezed into the cab of Donna's old black pickup and wound their way down the mountainside through the dark and the gusting wind.

Now, sweating but calm, Toby put on a robe, went downstairs, and poured a large single malt. She put a couple of sleeping tablets in her pocket, in case she needed them, and went back upstairs to her bedroom and favorite easy chair.

She took a small sip of the scotch, feeling it burn down her throat and warm her stomach, and gazed out at Deception Bay. The moon was shining, glittering softly on the restless water and, to the right, outlining the firs and cedars on the steep bluff that fronted the house. The view always soothed her. She felt safe here, insulated against whatever might happen in the outside world. And against whatever had happened in the past.

Toby lit a cigarette, a rare indulgence, and thought about little Gina. What would she say if she knew how one of her rapists had died, killed by three of her fellow Amazons? The girl had such an innocent face, such a look of openness. Her description of the gang-rape, told in her first meeting, had revealed how much fury she had hidden behind that innocent expression. The anger was still apparent at times, but she didn't seem to feel bitter. That wasn't easy to understand; Toby's own bitterness stretched back, acid and intense, over more than thirty years.

She gave her cigarette a vicious tap on the ashtray. She'd met Gina's male relatives and they were some of the worst male chauvinist pigs around. Well, they'd never assaulted Gina, so maybe they had something going for them, but she herself would never trust them.

Or any other man, for that matter. She sipped more scotch and let the moonlight calm her again. Dane had come into her store one day, seven or eight years ago, looking for sympathy and complaining that his wife was pregnant and unable to have sex. He'd asked her outright if she'd sleep with him and looked surprised when she refused. Then he'd had the nerve to push harder. That's when she told him to get out.

Midge had a similar story. Dane accused her of being a lesbian and she'd laughed in his face. Of course, Midge was big and strong enough not to be afraid if she made him angry. Their scheme for revenge had worked only because he'd never approached Donna, no doubt leery of her male relatives, well-known for their violent response to insult.

They'd found out accidentally that Dane was one of the rapists. Gina flatly refused to tell anyone who they were, other than that they were local. But, one day in the library, Donna happened to be looking at Gina's face when Dane walked by the library window. The girl's face tightened into a look of pure hatred. Donna immediately guessed that Dane had been part of the rape.

"Was that one of your rapists?" she'd asked.

Gina had flushed, then gone pale. She didn't speak, but after a few seconds hurried into the bathroom. Donna followed. When she heard Gina being sick, she went back to her desk.

Donna reported this event to Toby. "I want to kill him," Donna had said, her face hard.

"You're joking!"

"No, I'm not."

"Why?"

"For one reason, he deserves it because of the rape. For another, if I killed my uncles or brothers everybody would know it was me, so Dane makes a good substitute." Donna took a deep breath. "Ever since I started being assaulted, I've wanted to kill something. I think Dane is the right something."

It had taken Toby only a few minutes to realize that she felt the same way. She had desperately wanted to kill her own father, but couldn't find the courage to do it. Now that she was an adult, she knew she'd become capable of the act, and Dane would be the perfect substitute.

Later, Midge said she'd help, to avenge the battered women she looked after. None of the three doubted that the world would be a better place without him in it.

After that, planning Dane's exit turned out to be easy.

Toby butted her cigarette, returned to her downstairs bar, and poured another scotch. Now she would mentally replay the planning, as she did every time the nightmare came. Sometimes it calmed her enough that she didn't need the sleeping pills. Back upstairs, she settled into the easy chair and let her memory take over.

Donna suggested using the hunting cabin built by her uncle, Bert Zacharias, who loved hunting. However, he loved beer more, and he'd used the cabin only for a couple of seasons before he sank into the booze so deep that he became too shaky to aim a rifle. Nobody had used it since, except for Donna herself, when she needed to escape from family violence.

Toby and Midge decided to trust Donna's instincts. They couldn't risk going to look at it, in case somebody saw them and remembered that later. Donna described it for them. "It's about two hundred yards off Zillinsky Road and the driveway is just a grassy, overgrown trail. You can't see the cabin at all from the road; the bush is too thick."

"What's it like inside?"

"Nothing special. One big room, a couple windows, a wood heater, kitchen table and chairs, a cot in one corner, and an old sofa. There's no lock on the door so anybody can walk in. Other hunters might have used it over the years, though I never saw any trace."

"What if somebody walked in while we were there?" Midge looked worried.

"Oh," Donna said, "you can bar the main door on the inside. Same as the woodshed door at the back. When I used it as my safe place, I locked myself in, so nobody could get at me."

"A woodshed?" Toby asked. "Isn't that rather fancy for a hunting cabin?"

Donna said, "I'm pretty sure Bert thought he'd use it as an escape himself. From his wife. He thought he could sit in there and drink as much as he liked, for as long as he liked. So, he needed a handy place to store firewood and bring it to the heater when he was too drunk to put his boots on."

"There's a door between the main room and the woodshed?" Toby asked.

"Yes, you and Midge can hide in the woodshed when I bring dickhead into the cabin."

Naturally, Donna had to be the bait, since the other two had turned down Dane in the past, rejections which he wouldn't have forgotten or forgiven. "I hope he doesn't touch me when I'm driving up there," she'd said, with a grimace. "I'd probably puke."

They told her they'd scrap the idea rather than put her in a dangerous position.

"No," she said. "I can handle him. Who knows, he might like being roughed up a little."

Toby remembered then that Donna was heavily into kickboxing. "How are we going to get him up there?" she asked. "Everybody in town knows our vehicles."

"Not a problem," Donna said. "My cousin Jake in Victoria has an old, black pickup truck, with a few dents in it. It's never been out of Victoria, and I'll make sure the license plate is as mud-splattered as the rest of it usually is. I'll drive down and swap vehicles with him for a couple of days."

"What if Dane insists on driving his BMW?" Toby asked.

"He's in no position to insist on anything. I'll tell him the deal is off unless I drive," Donna said. "If he pushes, I'll say I'm thinking of his reputation. After all, he won't want to be seen with me, if he's trying to get Trish to come back. And I hear that's what he's doing."

"He'll want to know where you're going, too."

"I'll tell him I have a secret place where we can go, where there's no chance of our being seen, but I won't tell him where it is."

"He'll notice where you're taking him," Toby said, chewing a fingernail, a habit she thought she'd gotten rid of years ago.

Donna's smile was humorless. "That doesn't matter. He's not coming out again, is he?"

There was a wedge of silence after that. Then Midge had taken a deep breath. "Yeah, you're right. How are we going to do the job? Surely not with a bow and arrow."

"I have a gun," Donna said.

They'd both looked at her in surprise.

"It's a semi-automatic, unregistered, a trophy I stole from my father after he beat me up ten years ago."

Toby had said, "I never imagined you having a gun. Where do you keep it?"

"That's my secret," Donna said. "And it will remain my secret, for my safety and for yours. It's fully loaded and well-hidden, my protection against more attacks from any of my relatives. Nobody could trace it to me."

"What about your father?" Midge asked. "Doesn't he know you stole it?"

"No. He figures one of his cousins from Vancouver grabbed it on a visit over here. Then he bought another one, and the booze has likely drowned any memory he might have had of the first one." Donna paused. "We'll have to leave the gun there, of course, to make it look like dickhead committed suicide. Which is okay. I don't need it anymore to feel safe. I can never go back to the cabin either, but I don't think I'd want to."

They had talked more, but decided that simple was best. Late on Sunday, September 23rd, Donna had driven the black pickup back from Victoria and locked it in her garage. On Monday, September 24th, they put the rest of the plan into action.

Donna's days off were Sunday and Monday. So, late Monday afternoon, she used the public telephone, one of the few left in existence, in the Breslow hospital, to call Dane on his cell. If the cops got hold of Dane's cell, they could find out the time and duration of the call, but not who had made it or what had been said. Donna described the call, in detail, to Toby and Midge later that day.

"I told him I'd been admiring him from a distance for a while, and suggested that now his wife was away, he might be interested in letting me have a closer look. He was so eager I thought he was going to come right down the telephone line at me."

"I imagine his ego has been punctured because of Trish leaving," Midge said.

"Of course it has," Donna said. "Besides, everybody knows he's a randy bastard. And I'm about fifteen years younger than him, so that probably did some good things for his ego, not to mention his libido. Anyway, he wanted to start playing sex games right away and asked where I thought we should go. He even suggested I should come to his place."

"Not very smart of him. What if Trish decided to come back?" Midge said.

"I told him I had the perfect place, a secret, and he wanted to know where," Donna said, "but I wouldn't tell him. He argued a bit, but I said I'd pick him up at his house at eight-thirty on the dot, and that I'd be driving a beat-up black pickup."

Picking him up at home was the best move. Dane's house was on the outskirts of town and landscaped so as to be private. And, by eight-thirty, it would be nearly dark, so it was unlikely any of the neighbors would notice him climbing into a strange vehicle.

But, before Donna collected Dane, the sacrifice site had to be prepared. Around seven-thirty, she picked up Toby from her house, then Midge from her farm in Wynn Valley, and drove them to the cabin. She showed Toby how the gun worked, made sure there was nothing of her own in the place, and left to change and get Dane.

Midge and Toby donned terrycloth monk's robes to prepare for the sacrifice they intended to offer Artemis, in her demand for justice. They built a fire in the heater and lit the old kerosene lamp, being careful not to leave any fingerprints. As soon as they saw headlights coming up the driveway, they hid in the woodshed and waited.

Toby lit another cigarette. The nightmare was like a video, recording all that had happened, everything she'd heard. Living through it was hard to endure, but she had no regrets. Justice had been done. And the goddess had been satisfied, for she had blessed them with the most extraordinary luck.

The cops found out who built the cabin, of course, and its history of disuse. They didn't know how Dane had gotten there the night he died. They must have assumed that somebody had given him a lift. For weeks, she and Midge and Donna had worried about that, and about fingerprints, and whether Dane had been right-handed. They'd worried about a thousand things. Toby sometimes wondered if Midge and Donna had suffered through as many sleepless nights as she had.

Then the forest fire, though it led to the discovery of Dane's remains, had burned away all the evidence except for the gun and the scotch and spent bullets.

The cops had questioned Donna about the cabin, and things had been decidedly tense for a couple of days. But Donna had told them she hadn't used it since she'd taken up kickboxing, that she hadn't needed it after that. They had obviously believed her because three weeks later, an announcement in the paper and on TV said Dane's death had been deemed suicide.

The case was closed.

Toby stubbed out her cigarette, finished her drink, and shifted her thoughts to the Amazon Club. The club was actually divided now. Three of them had performed a genuine Tauropolia, had made blood sacrifice to the goddess. Four of them, Kitty, Phyllis, Gina, and Brenda, were more or less on the sidelines. They had never been fully devoted to the goddess, anyway, and would never have helped with the sacrifice. Which was fine; they'd had no need to make sacrifice.

And they would never know it had happened.

Chapter 15 Brenda hears endings

We sat snuggled together on the couch, holding hands. I'd closed the drapes against the howling November wind, and we were sipping hot rum and enjoying the heat and cheerful flames in my fireplace.

"This is so nice," I said. "I hardly ever build a fire."

"Why not?" Larry asked.

"Too lazy to shovel ashes out next day."

He leaned over and kissed my ear. "I'll do it. Later."

"Okay, but the next time, it'll be my turn." I thought about the pile of dishes in the sink and the littered table, but those could wait until tomorrow. I'd turned the phone off and any messages could wait, too. It was difficult for Larry and me to find time when we could be together on our own. His hours were crazy, and my clients seemed to believe I was available to them 24/7. I'd done my best to prevent any interruptions tonight.

"How did everything go at the Amazon meeting on Tuesday night?" Larry asked.

"It was quiet. And rather odd."

"C'mon, Brenda, the Amazon Club has always been odd!"

"Not anymore." I sat up straighter and turned to face him. "For one thing, Toby was more relaxed than I've ever seen her. She usually has a wry, even bitter, take on everything, but on Tuesday that attitude simply wasn't there. I think something really good must have happened in her personal life."

"I wonder what," Larry mused.

"I don't suppose we'll ever find out. She's such a very private person. Anyway, aside from being mellow, she had some suggestions for changes in how the club works."

"More fake sacrifices?"

"Nope, none at all. In fact, she's decided to dispense with the rituals around Artemis. Not even any offerings of wine and loyalty to the goddess. In fact, the altar had a big, fat cushion on it and looked so much like a hassock that I had to look twice to make sure that's what I was seeing."

Larry took a sip of his rum. "No more candlelight and wine at the table either?"

"Oh, she wants to keep those. The candles are a nice touch and wine helps the discussions along, same as in book clubs. But she said we might as well get rid of the costumes, too."

"Is this becoming merely a book club?"

"Oh, no!" I said. "We'll still do the archery practice on Sunday afternoons. Which makes me happy, even if it is taking forever for me to learn how to get the damned arrow to hit the target."

"You like challenges," Larry said. "So, the routine is being simplified to feminist discussion and archery."

"We have one more ritual to go through. That will be on Sunday."

"November 11th," Larry said. "Remembrance Day, commemorating those who died to end all wars. Do you suppose that's significant?"

"I don't know. Maybe. We're doing the ritual instead of archery, if that means anything. Toby did say that the ritual would be one of sacrifice, in that we're rejecting the most important symbols of worship. Then she made a remark that none of us questioned at the time, but has popped into my mind several times since. She said the time had come for Artemis to retire into history. Almost as though the goddess had been real to her."

"From my perspective," said Larry, "that seems like an excellent idea. Gods and goddesses have had their day. I can't see such symbols being relevant anymore."

"I agree. I realized afterward that the club is split, in a way. I suspect that Artemis will always be important to Toby and Midge. But the rest of us have only been playing at being Amazons, treating it as a game. We saw costumes and rituals as imitating the past, as drama. We see archery as a sport, not as a means to wage war."

Larry got up, put another log on the fire, and went into the kitchen with our empty mugs. He came back with two more hot rums and settled back on the couch. "Does this ritual on Sunday involve burning your robes, like women burned their bras back in the 1960s? That sounds like Toby's style."

"No, she said we'd burn the robes symbolically, not for real. Which is more or less what happened in the 60s, you know; it was just a symbol that caught on. I brought my robe home and I'm going to use it as a dressing gown. Or to lounge around in. Kitty said she's going to dye hers blue and use it as a beach wrap."

"Very practical!" Larry grinned. "I've never seen Toby as being that way, not since you told me what goes on at meetings."

"That's why I believe something happened to change her. The rest of us, I'm sure, see ourselves as normal women, but never as avenging goddesses. I think that Toby did see herself that way, though."

"I've always heard she was a man-hater."

"That's what I thought, too," I said, "and maybe she was. But from the way she acted Tuesday night, it felt like she's stopped looking at them as enemies."

"She could have been smoking something," Larry said, and grinned. "But if she wasn't, then doing this final ritual on November 11 does have significance. It used to be called Armistice Day, you know. Has Toby negotiated a truce?"

I moved closer to Larry. "Could be."

He nuzzled my neck and the thought forming in my mind simply vanished. "Any more gossip?" he murmured in my ear.

"I can think of more interesting things to do."

And, of course, we did them.



Next morning, I left Larry asleep in my bed and DeeCee asleep on the sideboard in the dining room, and went to the office, happy with the world. Because Anne-Marie didn't work on weekends, Saturdays were peaceful at Paradise Realty. However, this particular Saturday was busy, with people popping in and out all day long, in spite of the fact that it was a long weekend. Or maybe because it was a long weekend. I could think of arguments in both directions. I'd often suggested to Paul that we could do with somebody at the front desk on Saturdays, but sometimes he didn't seem to hear me.

Nobody wanted to buy or list real estate, though, so I came home at four. The bed wasn't made, but Larry had cleaned out the fireplace and washed the dishes. I blew a mental kiss to him. My delightful boy toy! That thought led me to wonder if Charlie had confessed to Gina yet. Then to decide he hadn't, or he'd have told me.

I finished my housework so that I could have Sunday completely free, then wandered down to The Maggie at ten to have a nightcap or two with Larry. If his day had been no more exciting than mine, we could play crib for a couple of hours.

I claimed my stool, greeted Larry, and received my gin and tonic. "Did you have a peaceful day?"

"No, all hell busted loose," he said.

"I thought you looked a bit more serious than usual." Larry often showed a poker face, no doubt from playing the game so much, and I couldn't tell if he was serious or just exaggerating for the fun of it.

He sighed. "Families! Susan's moved in with Midge's battered women out in Wynn Valley and nobody can find Buck."

In spite of what Larry had told me about Buck and Susan, this news was surprising. "That is definitely a mess. What happened, or do you know?"

"Mom phoned me at noon, right after I got home to the apartment," he said. "Susan came crying to her this morning and said Buck had beaten her up. Mom said she was bruised and cut and looked like hell. She wanted Susan to stay with her and Susan said she was afraid Buck would come looking for her there."

"So your mom took her out to Midge's. Well, she'll be safe with Midge."

Someone from the far end of the bar signaled, and Larry went to take the order. When he came back from delivering it, he said, "Yes, she'll be safe. Mom said only a fool would argue with Midge and those two Dobermans she has patrolling the property."

"I didn't know about the Dobermans. Midge herself can be fearsome enough when she puts her mind to it. So, what happens now?"

Larry shook his head. "Midge has a woman doctor on tap, and this doctor was supposed to go out there this afternoon and check Susan over, take pictures of her injuries and so forth, in case this thing ends up in court. And bandage her, you know, or whatever she had to do to fix her up."

I was silent for a moment. "But what about Buck? Did he get scared and run away? Doesn't Susan have any idea where he might go?"

"Apparently not. Mom couldn't get any sense out of her on that point. She has a key, so she went to Susan's house and checked, but Buck wasn't there, and his pickup wasn't either."

"Did she phone the cops?"

"No," Larry said. "She told Susan that that's what she was going to do, and Susan pleaded with her not to do it. She said that would just make it worse, that it would make Buck angry to have the cops sicced on him, and he'd beat her up much worse."

"There's another angle, too. Midge explained it at the Amazon Club one night. Some battered women try to protect their attackers, believing that the men will regret what they did and never do it again."

"Sounds kinda loony to me."

"That's what Midge said. Apparently, they almost always do it again."

Larry pulled the crib board from the shelf under the bar. He looked at me and said, "Shall we have a game? Unless you have something good in the way of gossip."

"No, sorry, it was a very ordinary day at the office. Nothing happened. Nobody told me any secrets." I knew he wanted to be distracted from his family problems. We cut for deal, and I lost.



Sunday was sunny, cold, and quiet. I had short chats with the neighbors on both sides, but succeeded in ignoring the leaves that still needed raking. I wanted to phone Larry and find out what was happening with his niece, but decided I'd wait until evening, when I knew he'd be working. Besides, I didn't want to be a nuisance and interrupt whatever was going on. If he wanted to talk to me, he'd phone.

I went down to The Maggie early, though. Curiosity is rarely fatal, but it's a driving force and it certainly is incurable.

I was glad to see Larry looking much more relaxed, though the bar was full, and he was working hard. People drink a lot on Remembrance Day, especially when the following day is a statutory holiday. I plunked onto my stool and, after a few moments, Larry came and built a gin and tonic for me.

"Are things improving, family-wise?" I raised my glass to toast him.

He nodded and grinned. "Yeah, much improved. You'll never guess."

"Probably not. That's why I ask questions."

"I'm serious! Even I would never have guessed, and I'm related to these weird people." He looked around the bar and obviously saw someone signal him. "Oh, hell, be back in a minute. Don't go away."

As if I would!

Finally, he came back and opened a beer for himself. "It's early for me to have a beer, but I'm celebrating. Buck showed up this morning. He flew in by helicopter, as usual, from the logging show on the west coast."

"From work?"

Larry nodded. "He was supposed to come home yesterday morning, Saturday, but he decided to stay and work another day to finish up the section where he was felling trees."

"But then who beat up on Susan?"

"Nobody." Larry shook his head and then grinned. "She fell down their basement stairs."

I'm usually never at a loss for words, but that did it. When I could get my thoughts in order, I said, "I see. She fell down the basement stairs. And decided to blame it on Buck. Where did she think that would get her?"

"The trouble with Susan is that she doesn't think. She wanted Buck to stay home and work here, but she also wanted the big money he makes in the woods. Buck tried to explain she couldn't have it both ways, but I guess she didn't believe him."

"But it wouldn't do her any good to pretend he was beating her."

"Of course not. And maybe she's now figured that out. Excuse me, Brenda, I have to go pour more drinks."

By the time he came back, I'd clued in on one fact. "I assume, that if anybody had thought to go check the helipad, they'd have found his truck parked there."

"Yes, absolutely," Larry said. "And we don't know if Susan fell down the stairs accidentally, or threw herself down them early yesterday morning, but she must have thought that Buck would come home, find her and be sorry that he hadn't done what she wanted. And then that he'd stay home and look after her. When he didn't show up, she panicked and went to my mom with her tale of being beaten."

All I could do was shake my head. And come up with a smart-ass remark. "One wonders how she ever made it through school. Or did she?"

"Oh, she's bright enough. But emotionally only about four. My mother was livid."

"I don't blame her. How about Buck, though? Is he nursing her back to health?"

Larry laughed. "That guy has more smarts than I thought. When we finally brought Susan back from Wynn Valley, I thought he'd probably tuck her up in bed and do whatever she asked. But he didn't."

"I'll bet he was tempted to spank her. Or beat her up, just the way she'd accused him of doing."

"What he did," said Larry, "was much better. And probably hard for him to do. He packed a suitcase for her. He loaded her and the suitcase into the truck and drove her to the Breslow airport. He put her on a plane to Edmonton, to her mother, and told her to stay there until she grew up. He said he'd be waiting for her, whenever that had happened."

I couldn't help laughing. "Did Susan object?"

"I think she was too stunned to say anything. And scared because he knew she'd lied about him hitting her. He could easily prove he hadn't done it, too. She cried a lot, but nobody paid any attention to the tears. He and my mom both treated her like the child she is."

"I'm surprised he wasn't angry."

Larry shrugged. "If he was angry, he got over it fast. There's no point being angry with a four-year-old. He was sad, though. I guess he thinks that if she could treat him like that, she doesn't care about him. Maybe she doesn't."

"Only time will tell. What's he going to do?"

"What he always does. Work. He'll save his money and keep the house tidy. I believe he loves Susan, in spite of everything. She does have some good qualities, though I'll admit they're a little hard to see sometimes. And he's a good guy."

"You've never heard anything bad about him?"

"No," Larry said. "His bosses come in here once in a while for a drink and they talk about the guys working for them. They like Buck. And he's not stupid, you know. He may have trouble expressing himself, but he knows his job and does it well."

"But you seemed prepared to believe that he was slapping Susan, or at least threatening her."

"So was my Mom. But we both know that what you see in a person is not necessarily what you get. After all, serial killers look like ordinary people, right?"

I admitted that he was right. "That's what makes it so hard to find the truth, when all you have is one person's word against another's."

"Yep, sometimes you just have to be there."

I handed him my glass for a refill. "So, all's well that ends well."

"These stories don't end," Larry said, slicing lemons. "There's always another instalment at some later time. But you have to wait for it."

"I'm glad we're waiting together. It's a lot of fun telling each other stories."

Larry gave me one of his high-wattage smiles and clicked his glass with mine. "Me, too, babe. Me, too!"

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Books by Lea Tassie

Tour Into Danger

Cats in Clover

Siamese Summers

Cat Under Cover

Cats & Crayons

Calico Cat Caper

Charger the Soldier

Charger the Weapon

Charger the God

The Missing Year

The Case of the Copycat Killer

Deception Bay

Deep Water

Dire Straits

Green Blood Rising

Red Blood Falling

Shockwave

A Clear Eye

Double Image

Eyes Like a Hawk

Harvest

Walking the Windsong

Connections

Two Shakes of a Lamb's Tail

Baa Baa Black Sheep, Have You Any Words?

About this book

Deception Bay is still what might be called a sleepy village, but right now it isn't peaceful. Between the possible sale of the venerable Wayfarer Inn to make way for upscale condominiums, and a major fire, Larry, local bartender, and Brenda, local realtor, have plenty to gossip about. Add the discovery of human remains in a hunter's cabin, and they also have plenty to be curious about. Since both have a never-ending fascination with why humans do the things they do, they are still discovering odd things about the covert Amazon Club and other village denizens. Brenda and Larry have become lovers, but she is still dating Charlie, too, and this pushes village gossip meter over the top. They manage to deal with that backlash without losing their senses of humor, but some people find themselves in the deep water of dangerous or vulnerable situations.

Author Bio

Lea Tassie grew up on an isolated homestead in northern British Columbia. Now she lives and writes in the beautiful, temperate, Pacific Coast rainforest. Her fiction includes cat humor, science fiction, and mainstream novels. Her non-fiction deals in a light-hearted way with the weird words and phrases found in the English language.

